Case 1: The Shoe Bomber

John Mueller June 3, 2011

Richard Reid failed when, a few months after 9/11, he attempted to detonate the bomb in his shoe on a transatlantic airliner headed for Miami. He was subdued by passengers and crew as he kept lighting matches seeking to ignite a fuse protruding from his shoe.

As Jolie Yang points out, Reid had spent two years in training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan between 1998 and 2000, and he had specifically received bomb training by Midhat Mursi who is often billed as al-Qaeda's "master bomb-maker." That, it appears, was not enough.

A major problem with Reid's bomb is that its chemical explosive, PETN, is fairly stable and difficult to detonate. The best detonators are metallic, like blasting caps, and these are likely to be spotted by the metal detectors passengers and their carry-on baggage were subjected to well before 9/11. Consequently, the bomb needs to be well designed—indeed, fool-proof. Moreover, the bomber, closely surrounded by people likely—particularly in the wake of 9/11—to be suspicious of odd behavior, needs not only to be highly skilled at the tricky task of detonation, but fully capable as well of improvising wisely to unforeseen technical problems like, in this case, damp shoelaces. Another problem is that the carefully (and therefore expensively) trained bomber is almost certain to be killed or captured in the attempt, and he is therefore lost for further missions.

Whether Reid's bomb would have downed the airplane if he had been able to detonate it, is open to question. Explosions do not necessarily breach the fuselage, and airplanes with breached fuselages may still be able to land safely. Reid's bomb contained 50 grams of PETN. However, a similar bomb with 100 grams of the explosive, hidden on, or in, the body of a suicide bomber and detonated in 2009 in the presence of his intended victim, a Saudi prince, killed the bomber but only slightly wounded his target a few feet away. For more on this issue, see the discussion of the underwear bomber of 2009, Case 33.

¹ Bryan Walsh, "Why It's Not Easy to Detonate a Bomb on Board," *Time*, December 28, 2009.

² John Mueller and Mark Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money: Balancing the Risks, Costs, and Benefits of Homeland Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), ch. 7.

³ Peter Bergen and Bruce Hoffman, Assessing the Terrorist Threat, Bipartisan Policy Center, Washington, DC, September 10, 2010, 9.

Case 1: The Shoe Bomber

June 3, 2011 typographical and other minor corrections November 16, 2011

1. Overview

On December 22, 2001, Richard Reid, a British citizen, boarded an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami with the intention of blowing up the plane. Passengers and flight attendants subdued Reid before he could successfully light the fuse protruding from his sneaker. Two French doctors on the flight injected sedatives into Reid, and the plane was diverted to Boston. Reid was sentenced to life in prison for attempted use of a weapon of mass destruction against U.S. nationals outside the United States and interference with flight crew and attendants using a dangerous weapon. He was also sentenced to 20 years in prison on four counts: attempted homicide of U.S. nationals outside the United States, placing an explosive device on an aircraft, attempted murder of people on board the flight, and the attempted destruction of an aircraft. To this, 30 years were for using a destructive device in a crime of violence. On top of the sentences, Reid is required to pay a fine of \$2 million.

2. The nature of the adversary

When looking back to the shoe-bomber's past, one can trace how his youth made him prone to convert to Islam and susceptible to radicalism. Richard Reid was born to Colvin Robin Reid who was of mixed-race and Lesley Hughes who was white, in London in 1973 and thus is of Anglo-Jamaican heritage. When he was born, his father was in jail for car theft. His parents divorced when he was 11. Reid's father was never in the picture for long, and he was raised by his mother and her partner—brought up, then, in a white family as a mixed-race child. At 16, the earliest age possible, Reid dropped out of school and gravitated toward gangs and crime in London.

The two main themes that arise from his childhood are his continuous search for his identity and the niche he found in the crime world. As a mixed-race child, Reid faced a lot of identity issues and comments from his peers. According to Reid's close friend in school, he was trying to "sort out where he was from, his roots. He wanted to find out an identity—but he's got two white parents." Jane Green, a teacher from his school remarked that Reid seemed to have trouble identifying with the kids due to his mixed race. He would identify with the other black kids but did not seem to fit in with them. However, Green mentioned that Reid, despite being a social outcast, was never rude or disruptive. After dropping out of school, Reid had to support himself when his mother and her partner moved to West Country. He aligned himself with local gangs in London but was at first reluctant to practice crime and robbed houses only when held at knifepoint. However, he soon became integrated in the crime world and his friend remarked that Reid was quick to follow the crowd if it would give him status. At age 17, he

¹ "Exchange between Reid, judge follows life sentence," CNN, January 30, 2003.

² "At school with the shoe bomber," *The Guardian*, February 28, 2002.

was jailed for the first time for mugging a senior citizen. He was in and out of prison ever after.

Reid converted to Islam in prison. The idea was first presented by his father who himself had converted to Islam in prison in the 1980s. His father remarked that the Muslims "treat you like a human being" and get better food in prison.³ Since the 1980s, Bangladeshi and Pakistani imams targeted prisons where they spread the importance of jihad and distributed anti-American leaflets. Abdul Ghani Qureshi, an imam at the jail at the time, said, the mosque offered an "escape in many ways—spiritual and practical" to black prisoners in a notoriously racist institution. 4 Upon leaving jail, Reid joined the Brixton Mosque and Islamic Cultural Center which is known for its moderate message. The chairman of the mosque, Abdul Haqq Baker, said that at the time, Reid seemed at ease with himself and his identity, quite different from his teen years. Most likely, the sense of self came from the conversion to Islam. Ziauddin Saradar, a British scholar of Islam once remarked that, "Islam is a sort of natural religion for underdogs and that's one reason why Afro-Caribbean people have found its message very attractive." 5 Converting to Islam helped Reid identify a sense of identity and community that he was lacking.

The source of Reid's sudden radicalization is not entirely clear, but the discrimination he faced may have had a significant effect. Reid said that he was heavily influenced by the imams and by radical sermons, but it was through his own readings and experience that he gained the understanding of how violence can be justified in his faith and how Islam was treated by the west. 6 Brixton Mosque was attended at the same time by some notorious terrorists such as Zacarias Moussaoui and Djamel Behal. Reid also attended the Islamic Cultural center, and then attended the Finsbury Park Mosque, known for its radical messages and attendance by suspected terrorists. Despite the radical message, it attracts a sizable number for its prayers. According to Sardar, the mosque attracts "younger, more disaffected Muslims, mainly from working-class backgrounds, mostly unemployed, unmarried. These guys see themselves as totally under siege. For them, jihad is a salvation." Reid also practiced a conservative form of Islam, Wahhabism. According to Mehmood Nagshbandi, author of the City of London's guide to Islam for non-Muslims, Wahhabism is especially attractive for modern British Muslims because it rejects old traditions/ethics and a provides a new identity. 8 Through the combination of the radical message of Finsbury Park Mosque and the nature of Wahhabism, Reid was eventually radicalized from the moderate Muslim he had been before.

3. Motivation

³ "The Shoe Bomber's World," *Time*, February 16, 2002.

⁴ "At school with the shoe bomber," *The Guardian*, February 28, 2002.

⁵ "The Shoe Bomber's World," *Time*, February 16, 2002.

⁶ Peter Herbert, "I knew exactly what I was doing," *The Guardian*, August 23, 2006.

⁷ "The Shoe Bomber's World," *Time*, February 16, 2002.

⁸ "Wahhabism: A deadly scripture," *The Independent*, November 1, 2007.

The main motivation for Reid is the notion of justice. In response to America's involvement in the Middle East, he sees his actions as necessary and justifiable. At a hearing, Richard Reid detailed his motivation for his attempt to blow up the plane with explosives.

"I'm at war with your country. I'm at war with them not for personal reasons but because they have murdered...so many children and they have oppressed my religion and they have oppressed people for no reason except that they say we believe in Allah."

Reid testifies that his response is due to America's foreign policy in Muslim affairs. He also mentions the innocent deaths caused by Americans and the government-sanctioned violence against Muslims in the prisons of Egypt, Turkey, Syria, and Jordan. Furthermore, he states that the "United States should not be involved in Muslim affairs such as supporting Israel," and that he "switched his target from Israel to America after America began bombing the Taliban." All of these comments point to an anger directed towards America's foreign policy actions. However, it is interesting to note that Reid also believes that the war he was fighting is between Islam and democracy suggesting a possible belief among radicalized Muslims that there is an inherent incompatibility between democracy and Islam:

"What I am doing is part of the ongoing war between Islam and disbelief...I see it as a duty upon me to remove oppressive American forces from Muslim lands...we are ready to die defending the true Islam rather to just sit back and allow the American government to dictate to us what we should believe and how we should behave...this is a war between Islam and democracy..."

Despite this comment, his motivation is mainly based on the fact that America is interfering in what Reid sees as Muslim affairs. When interviewed, Reid seems to show genuine sorrow that his actions might kill innocent people but a lack of remorse because of his belief that it was right. He believed that Allah in heaven would justly reward him for his actions if he succeeded.

4. Goals

To achieve his main goal to remove American forces from Muslim lands and for America to not meddle with Muslim affairs, Reid aimed for an overreaction from America's public. He targeted an airline "especially during the holiday season" because he wanted to the American public to "lose confidence in airline security and stop traveling, leading to a substantial loss of revenue which would in turn hurt the American economy." This strategy of targeting areas of

⁹ "Reid: 'I am at war with your country'," CNN, January 31, 2003.

¹⁰ U.S. v. Reid, (D.C. MA.), 02-CR-10013-WGY, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, Filed January 17, 2003

¹¹ U.S. v. Reid, (D.C. MA.), 02-CR-10013-WGY.

¹² "I knew exctly what I was doing," *The Guardian*, August 24, 2006.

¹³ U.S. v. Reid, (D.C. MA.), 02-CR-10013-WGY.

economic significance is partially motivated by the belief that the Soviet forces were driven out of Afghanistan and led the collapse of the Russian Empire by Bin Laden's efforts in bankrupting the Soviet Union. ¹⁴ This sentiment is reflected in the al-Qaeda publication *Sawt al-Jihad*,

"If the enemy has used his economy to rule the world and hire collaborators, then we need to strike his economy with harsh attacks to bring it down on the heads of its owners. If the enemy has built his economy on the basis of open markets and free trade by getting the monies of investors, then we have to prove to these investors that the enemy's land is not safe for them, that his economy is not capable of guarding their monies, so they would abandon him to suffer alone the fall of his economy." ¹⁵

A bankrupt America would worry primarily about its own economy rather than foreign affairs.

5. Plans for violence

Reid's plans developed as he started to become more radicalized within the Muslim community. It is through the connections developed through his interactions with people that led him to obtain the supplies needed to carry out his plan.

By 1998, Reid has chosen jihad as his path and spent the next two years in Pakistan and Afghanistan training camps. ¹⁶ According to French officials, Reid's passport showed that he has traveled to Egypt, Israel, Turkey, Pakistan, Belgium, Netherlands, and France. Furthermore, it is believed that he trained at the same camp as Zacarias Moussaoui, a terrorist associated with the September 11 attacks, in a camp called Khalden. ¹⁷ At Khalden, he was trained by al-Qaeda "master bomb maker" Midhat Mursi, also known as Abu Khabab al-Masri. ¹⁸

It was on a flight to Tel Aviv, Israel, on El Al Airlines on July 12, 2001, that Reid got the idea for the shoe bomb. He noticed that El Al security personnel did not check the inside of his shoes. ¹⁹ On August 9, Reid went to Amsterdam and was able to send e-mails to addresses in Pakistan from internet cafes without much suspicion. Furthermore, according to Rohan Gunarratna, an expert on terrorism at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, the Netherlands has become a center of al-Qaeda activity. This was further supported by the fact that Jerome Courtailler, a French convert to Islam, may have helped Reid find temporary employment in Rotterdam. ²⁰ It is believed that during this time, Reid planned the attack on America.

According to a French court document, "Reid claimed to have found the information required to make the explosives on the internet, to have bought the

¹⁴ Transcript of Usama Bin Laden Tape, November 2, 2005.

¹⁵ Akhu Man Ta'a Allah, "What Else is There to Say About September 11," *Sawt al-Jihad*, Volume 26.

¹⁶ "The Shoe Bomber's World." *Time*, February 16, 2002.

¹⁷ Herbert, "I knew exactly what I was doing."

¹⁸ "Sources: Reid is al Qaeda Operative," CNN, December 6, 2003.

¹⁹ U.S. v. Reid, (D.C. MA.), 02-CR-10013-WGY.

²⁰ "The Shoe Bomber's World." *Time*, February 16, 2002.

ingredients in Amsterdam for 1,500 dollars, to have set up the device and placed it in the soles of his shoes. Then, he stated, he had the shoe stitched up by a professional and wore them uneventfully for one month." Despite this testimony, authorities still believe that the Reid did not possess enough technical knowledge and that the device was assembled in France. ²¹

Accompanying Reid in his plot was Saajid Badat. Originally, Badat believed that he would find paradise by carrying out a violent jihad, and both went to the same training camp and kept constant communication afterwards. However, Badat got cold feet days before the intended attack. In an e-mail, he said he had "big problems...having trouble playing any sport whatsoever," and remarked that "you will have tell Van Damme that he could be on his own." However, although he never actually did anything, Badat was sentenced to 13 years in jail. Badat's bomb was similar in chemical composition as Reid's and Badat also remarked that they were supplied the bombs from an external source. This suggests that both Badat and Reid did not act completely separately from other terrorists.

To obtain new passports to board American flights, both Badat and Reid used the same tactic, falsely claiming to have lost their passports, at the British Embassy in Brussels.²³ On December 21, 2001, Reid first attempted to board American Airlines Flight 63 but was subjected to extra searches and questioning that caused him to miss his original flight. Although he was eventually allowed to fly the next day, French court documents revealed that

"the thirteen witnesses interviewed regarding this inspection procedure—policemen, security agents and agents of American Airlines—indicated that they have been troubled, indeed perplexed, by the personality and the behavior of Richard Reid, described as filthy, very unkempt, emotionless, and not attempting to find out why he was being subjected to an inspection. He did not appear at all anxious." ²⁴

On the American Airlines Flight the next day, Reid attempted to ignite the fuse by using a match but was noticed before he was successful at doing so. Water was quickly thrown on him, and he was subdued by multiple passengers and flight attendants. It is speculated that his shoe did not detonate because he had worn his shoes for more than a day and the fuse was too damp to ignite.²⁵

The shoe contained stabilized Triacetonetriperoxide (TATP), a highly volatile and explosive compound made from easily attainable chemicals, and Pentaerthritol Tetranitrate (PETN), an explosive component used in military-grade plastic explosive. Due to its volatile nature, it is precarious to handle and construct TATP. At terrorist training courses, terrorists were taught how to stabilize their mixtures with certain chemical compounds. ²⁶ Both TATP and

²¹ Republic of France v. Rama, Magistrates' Court of Paris, File number 0413839059, Judgment, Filed June 16, 2005.

²² "Gloucester shoebomber jailed for 13 years," *Times Online*, April 22, 2005.

²³ U.S. v. Badat, (D.C. MA>) 04-10223-GAO, Superseding Indictment, Filed October 4, 2004.

²⁴ Republic of France v. Rama, Magistrates' Court of Paris.

²⁵ "JTIC Briefing: Terrorist Use of TATP Explosive," OSINFO, July 25, 2005.

²⁶ "JTIC Briefing: Terrorist Use of TATP Explosive," OSINFO, July 25, 2005.

PETN are fairly hard to detect by conventional screening technologies. Reid's bomb had a thread of TATP running through 100 grams of PETN that ran through his shoelace.²⁷

It would be a mistake to assume that the failure of denotation was mainly due to Reid's incompetence. Due to the delay in his flight by French airport authorities on December 21, Reid was not able to board the flight until the next day which means he had to wear the shoe for an extra day resulting in natural perspiration causing the fuse to become too damp to ignite properly.²⁸

However, the nature of Reid's bomb also suggests there would have been difficulty in effectively detonating the bomb regardless. Although PETN is powerful even in small quantities, it is fairly stable and therefore not easy to ignite. It requires an initial explosion, which usually requires a metallic device that is hard to pass through security without detection, such as a blasting cap. Explosive experts remark that dropping PETN or setting it on fire is usually not enough to detonate it. The underwear bomber of 2009, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, used the same combination of PETN and TATP, and also failed to ignite the PETN due to its stable nature (Case 33).

Furthermore, even if Reid had been successful at detonating his explosive, it is unclear whether this would have resulted in significant deaths. Abdulmuttallab had more PETN in his bomb, and a test explosion on a Boeing airplane showed that the plane's fuselage would not break open and that the flight would have landed safely even if that bomb had been detonated. However, the bomber and the passenger next to him would have been killed.³¹

Although Reid was unsuccessful in detonating the bomb, it is important to note that this is mainly due to the nature of the bomb. It is hard to detonate a PETN bomb, and it is even harder for terrorists to carry detonators that will not be detected.

6. Role of informants

There were no informants involved with the case.

7. Connections

After Reid was captured, both American and French authorities tracked down more information about him. They uncovered e-mail exchanges between Reid and Badat, Reid and other al-Qaeda operatives. And as more terrorists were captured, more information regarding the nature of Reid's operation was unveiled.

It is clear that he had a support structure in place. A French court document mentioned that, "he was not able to explain how, since he did not have any funds... he had been able to purchase the [explosive] substances and to pay for his travels." ³²

²⁷ "TATP is suicide bombers' weapon of choice," Times Online, July 15, 2005.

²⁸ "JTIC Briefing: Terrorist Use of TATP Explosive," OSINFO, July 25, 2005.

²⁹ "Why It's Not Easy to Detonate a Bomb on Board," *Time*, December 28, 2009.

³⁰ "Explosive on Flight 253 Is Among Most Powerful," New York Times, December 27, 2009.

³¹ "PETN: the explosive of choice," *The Guardian*, October 30, 2010.

³² Republic of France v. Rama, Magistrates' Court of Paris.

There was another person's palm print and hair residue on the bomb, suggesting that Reid did not act alone. His direct support for his mission is his handler, Nizar Trabelsi, and his partner, Badat. Although Badat did not carry through the plan in the end, authorities revealed information between Reid and Badat. And according to the Department of justice, in December 2001, "Badat and Reid communicated directly and indirectly through...electronic mail accounts to coordinate their activities with respect to detonating their shoe bombs to be used to attack American interests." ³³ Furthermore, French authorities have discovered an e-mail exchange between an interlocutor in Pakistan and Reid after Reid had been detained in France urging him to try again the next day. As time progressed, authorities discovered that the September 11 attacks, the Paris plot, and Flight 63 all shared a common cast of characters. There is also evidence that Reid knew Moussaoui, Beghal, and Travelsi. The speculation is that all of these radical Islamists have at some point crossed paths in camps or in London. ³⁴

Authorities believe that Reid's contacts resulted from Rama, an owner of a halal butcher shop. According to the French intelligence, he was the president of a Pakistani terrorist group called Lashkar-e-Tayyiba. Given the fact that his butcher shop is known for "being a place of proselytizing in favor of Jihad in Kashmir," Rama is believed to have been part of a larger network of terrorists. Rama did acknowledge meeting with Reid but did not claim to have introduced him to other contacts, but it is believed that Rama wanted to cover for someone more important who put him in touch with Reid. 36

7. Relation to the Muslim community

As noted, most of Reid's connections resulted not only from the training camps but from his attendance at the Finsbury Park Mosque where he was influenced by the preacher, Mustafa Kamel Mustafa. Mustafa is now sentenced to seven years in a British prison for soliciting murder in his sermons, and he has been indicted in New York for providing material support to al-Qaeda. Another spiritual advisor that had a significant influence on Reid was Abu Qatada who according to British Home Department, was "a leading spiritual advisor with extensive links to and influence over, extreme Islamists in the UK and overseas." Qatada is reported to have given spiritual and religious advice to extreme Islamists and groups that include the Al Qa'eda network, the Armed Islamic Group, and the Salafist Group for Call and Combat.

9. Depiction by the authorities

³³ U.S. v Badat, (D.C. MA.), 04-10223-GAO, Superseding Indictment, Filed October 4, 2004.

³⁴ "The Shoe Bomber's World," *Time*, February 16, 2002.

³⁵ Republic of France v. Rama, Magistrates' Court of Paris.

³⁶ "French Police Investigate 'Shoe Bomber' Richard Reid's Connections," *Le Figaro*, April 9, 2005.

³⁷ "Abu Hamza Jailed for Seven Years," Metropolitan Police Service Press Release, February 8, 2006.

³⁸ Special Immigration Appeal Commission, Oma Othman and Secretary of State for the Home Department, Judgment, Filed February 26, 2007.

Originally, it was believed that Reid might be a lone terrorist, one who felt alienated from society and turned to extremism as a solution. However, this attitude slowly changed with the increasing amount of information gained of Reid's contacts and connections. Furthermore, Reid was originally portrayed as an incompetent bomber due to his failure in detonating the bomb, but it was soon discovered that his education regarding bomb making was extensive and that the failure is due to the weather conditions and to chance. Reid has represented himself as someone who has, "passed through the state education system and then supplemented his knowledge with a large amount of self-teaching through reading books." Thus the view, common at the beginning, that Reid was educationally impaired has been abandoned. As Reid puts it, "I am not crazy as they suggest, but I knew exactly what I was going. Of course I would have been sad to have those people die, but I knew that my cause was just and righteous. It was the will of Allah that I did not succeed." ³⁹

10. Depiction by the media

Almost all the articles in major newspapers, were fairly descriptive of the situation. Most focused on Reid's background and how passengers cooperated to stop Reid from carrying through his plan. Even three years later, most articles only revealed more information about Reid's associates and the network of terrorists he may have been a part of.

The articles were not more alarming perhaps because 9/11 was still fresh in people's minds and employing alarmist rhetoric might only cause further panic. Also, the government was fairly quick in responding to the shoe bomber plot by enacting laws such as screening shoes during airport security.

11. Policing costs

After the arrest, there has been extensive investigation both in the United States and in Europe. In France, investigators traced Reid's flight plans prior to his flight to Miami where they discovered his extensive travels throughout the Middle East. French investigators also traced his prepaid calls to known terrorists providing a bigger picture of the network Reid was part of. In the United States, previously captured terrorists detained in Guantanamo Bay identified Reid as a student at Khalden and the network of operatives he was part of. As more information regarding Reid's involvement unravels, the big picture slowly comes to light. Connections between the September 11 plot and the Flight 63 plot were made, leading officials to believe that Reid and other 9/11 terrorists knew each other and crossed paths at camps and/or in London.

12. Relevance of the internet

Reid primarily used the internet for communication purposes with his handler, Nizar Trabelsi, and other contacts. Many e-mails were traced to places such as Peshawar, Pakistan, and to contacts in Europe. 40 Reid also used the internet as a source for obtaining information on constructing a bomb, though he

³⁹ Herbert, "I knew exactly what I was doing."

⁴⁰ "A Shoe Bomber's World," *Time*, February 16, 2002.

also had had extensive training as well as contacts with others on bomb construction.

13. Are we safer?

Immediately following the incident, TSA mandated airport security to screen shoes. This has resulted in inefficiency, lawsuits, and grumblings from passengers. However, it is questionable whether this extra screening will lead to a safer flying experience. According to Sgt. Dave Thompson of the Massachusetts State Police, explosives can be made from a toy to a bottle of cologne. Almost anything made of plastic could potentially become a powerful plastic explosive. But, there is evidence that trace detectors would have stopped the shoe bomber if they had been implemented in 2001. Furthermore, the implementation of full body scans is aimed to detect traces of PETN unless it is hidden in a body cavity, and new technologies that can detect individual explosive molecules are being used as part of the airport security process. Although current measures may reduce the chances of another shoe bomb—or deter further attempts—they only close one door open to terrorists to effectively create and detonate an explosive.

14. Conclusions

What is most notable about Reid's case is his conviction about his Jihad. Reid viewed himself as a warrior, fighting a war against the West due to its hostility towards Islam. His abstract goal of forcing America out of the Middle East through terrorism is common. But it is this type of conviction among terrorists of fighting injustice that makes it hard for America to successfully combat terrorism since the root of the problem is based on abstract ideals.

As America continues to fight the war on terrorism, it is important to understand how the problem is changing. Simply focusing on military interventions in the Middle East is not enough as is shown by the Reid case. Feeling oppressed and marginalized by society, Reid converted to Islam only to become progressively more extreme. Foreign policy advisors need to focus on strategies that also address the terrorist networks that exist in their allies' countries.

⁴¹ "Stopping explosive powder PETN main goal of new airport screening rules," *Los Angeles Times*, November 23, 2010.