

**Case 33: The Underwear Bomber**

John Mueller

July 12, 2011

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's effort to blow up a US-bound airliner in 2009 failed for the same central reason that Richard Reid's shoe-bomb effort in 2001 (Case 1) failed: the chosen explosive, PETN, is fairly stable and difficult to detonate, particularly because the most reliable detonators, like blasting caps, are metallic and cannot be used because they are likely to be picked up even by screening methods in place before 9/11.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, more complicated methods of detonation need to be employed, and these are likely to strain the capacities of an amateur bomber especially when he is surrounded by people who are likely to notice strange behavior and who have an overwhelmingly strong incentive in the post-9/11, or post-shoe bomb, era to do something about it.

Moreover, a successful explosion might well have failed to down the airliner. There were only 80 grams of PETN in Abdulmutallab's underwear (Reid had 50 grams in his shoe), and, as noted in the discussion of Case 1, a successful 100 gram PETN explosion earlier by a terrorist in Saudi Arabia in 2009 killed the bearer of the bomb, but failed even to injure the bomber's intended victim who was standing nearby. And, as Matthew Spade notes, a test by the BBC of this same explosion on a decommissioned airplane of the same type suggests the plane would have been able to land safely even if the bomb had gone off.

It is generally assumed that the bomb was designed by someone in Yemen who is continually called a "master bomb maker." A true master, one might think, would be one whose product not only works when it is supposed to, but accomplishes and is capable of accomplishing its destructive goal. Neither condition, it seems likely, held in this case. Abdulmutallab claims that many other bombers are being groomed in Yemen to attack aircraft bound for the United States.<sup>2</sup> None have yet shown up, but if the claim is correct, it would seem the vaunted "master bomb maker" has his work cut out for him.

Although there was no explosion on the airplane, there were three rather odd casualties of the underwear episode. Janet Napolitano, who had become Director of Homeland Security earlier in the year, committed one of those gaffs determined to be such not by rationality, but by political emotion. Early on, she maintained that "once the incident occurred, the system worked," a reasonably unexceptionable observation except that people averse to qualifiers managed to remember only the last three words and argued that the system had failed because it failed to keep the failed bomber from boarding the plane in the first place. By contrast, risk analyst Bruce Schneier argues that, in fact, the system *did* work because it forced the bomber to use an unreliable method for detonation and because of passenger alertness and resistance—a very important safety barrier,

---

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

<sup>2</sup> Anna Schechter and Brian Ross, "Obama Orders Air Marshal Surge by Feb. 1: 'Race Against Time,'" *abcnews.com*, January 6, 2010.

incidentally, that costs nothing at all.<sup>3</sup> Napolitano's critics were joined by the American-born Yemeni cleric and terrorist philosopher, Anwar al-Awlaki, when he proclaimed, "Our brother Umar Farouk has succeeded in breaking through the security systems that have cost the U.S. government alone over forty billion dollars since 9/11."<sup>4</sup> Al-Awlaki actually underestimates the costs of airline security.<sup>5</sup> However, following Schneier's observations, the key issue is not that the terrorist got through some of the security barriers, but that the effort failed miserably because of them. Moreover, the fact that "our brother Umar Farouk" is now talking freely and fully in captivity, turning traitor to his cause, rather suggests that the whole enterprise was, from the perpetrators' perspective, an utter fiasco.

Although Napolitano retained her job despite her supposed gaff, another victim of the terrorism episode didn't. Dennis Blair's tenure as Director of National Intelligence included not only this attempt, but the equally unsuccessful Times Square terrorist effort of May 2010 (Case 27) as well as the shooting rampage at Fort Hood by a deranged psychiatrist (Case 25). That was too much for President Barack Obama, and Blair was fired on May 20, 2010.

The final victim was the American taxpayer who endured a triple blow. First, Blair's experience is likely to further guarantee that any successor, in an understandable desire to protect an important part of his or her anatomy, will be strongly inclined to expend any sum of taxpayer funds, no matter how ill-advised, if there is any chance at all the expenditure will prevent the spender from suffering Blair's fate. Second, Obama ordered an urgent (and therefore expensive) increase—a "surge" and a "race against time" they called it—in the air marshal program.<sup>6</sup> This, even though it was the passengers who successfully handled the underwear threat and even though any air marshals on board would be of no value whatever because they would be seated far away in first class to keep a wary eye on the cockpit door under the almost never-examined assumption that, despite the lessons of the fourth plane on 9/11, a direct replication of that tragedy is remotely possible. And third, the Transportation Security Administration rushed ahead with the deployment of full-body scanners in American airports (however, not initially at least in foreign ones like the one Abdulmutallab used to board his plane) without, it appears, bothering to comply with a Government Accountability Office demand that their cost-effectiveness be evaluated first. Taxpayers are advised that both the scanners and the air marshal program (both of which cost around \$1 billion per year) are likely to fail a cost-benefit analysis.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Schneier, Post-Underwear-Bomber Airport Security, *schneier.com*, January 7, 2010. Schneier usefully concludes: "If we refuse to be terrorized, if we refuse to implement security theater and remember that we can never completely eliminate the risk of terrorism, then the terrorists fail even if their attacks succeed."

<sup>4</sup> Garrett M. Graff, *The Threat Matrix: The FBI at War in the Age of Global Terror* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011), 586.

<sup>5</sup> John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money: Balancing the Risks, Costs, and Benefits of Homeland Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> Schechter and Ross, "Obama Orders Air Marshal Surge."

<sup>7</sup> Mueller and Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money*, ch. 7. Mark G. Stewart and John Mueller, "Risk and Cost-Benefit Analysis of Advanced Imaging Technology Full Body Scanners for Airline

Abdulmutallab's case is another that calls into question exactly what it is that "radicalization" means. As Spade stresses, he was obviously dedicated to the cause and willing to die for it, and he dutifully recorded a "martyrdom video." However, once captured, the terrorist was, as noted, soon spilling all sorts of helpful information to his captors. In this, he was partly yielding to the importunings of a couple of family members from whom he was previously presumably rebelling—it was his concerned father, after all, who alerted authorities to his son's association with extremists. Thus, not only has international terrorism lost a dedicated asset, but the one it had deployed has been effectively converted after the fact into a spy for its enemies—something that also happened with Bryant Neal Vinas (Case 17) and Najibullah Zazi (Case 21).

The case has inspired yet more calls for intelligence agencies to share and coordinate information. Abdulmutallab was on some watch and tip lists, but these bits of information weren't put together, in part because, as Spade notes (and Schneier as well), there already is a considerable amount of "information overload." The calls are likely not only to increase this problem but also its already-massive attendant expense—an issue that calls out for systematic evaluation. And it should be noted that, if one does manage to connect the dots, one often comes up with a shape that looks like an amoeba.

February 19, 2016: This case and, in particular, its impact on the Obama administration is discussed at length in Charlie Savage, *Power Wars: Inside Obama's Post-9/11 Presidency* (New York, Little, Brown, 2015).

An hour-long documentary on BBC Two, "How Safe Are Our Skies -- Detroit Flight 253" (Executive Producer Alison Turner), was shown in March 2010. It concludes that the amount of explosive in the bomb was only "a fraction of what it would have taken to bring the plane down" (51:30) and that the planned triggering process "is difficult to achieve even in a laboratory" (36:30).

As of February 24, 2017, the documentary was available on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBYImI4Dtn0>

## Case 33: The Underwear Bomber

Matthew Spade

July 12, 2011

typographical and other minor corrections December 27, 2011

### 1. Overview

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab purchased his ticket in cash on December 16, 2009, in the capital of Ghana. It is common to buy plane tickets with cash in Africa; therefore, Abdulmutallab was able to proceed without raising any red flags. On December 25, he boarded Northwest Airlines Flight 253 en route from Amsterdam, Netherlands, to Detroit, Michigan.

As the flight approached Detroit, Abdulmutallab visited the restroom, where he remained for approximately 20 minutes. Upon returning to his seat Abdulmutallab attempted to ignite 80 grams of pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN) that had been sewn into his underwear. Apparently the substance failed to fully ignite. Nearby passengers noticed that both Abdulmutallab's pants and the wall of the aircraft had caught fire. He was tackled by Dutch filmmaker Jasper Schuringa, and one of the flight crew doused the flames with a fire extinguisher. The plane landed safely and Abdulmutallab was taken into custody.

He was initially charged on December 26 with two criminal counts and additional charges were added at a grand jury indictment on January 6, 2010. The most serious counts are attempted use of a weapon of mass destruction and the attempted murder of nearly 300 people.

Abdulmutallab at first refused to cooperate with the authorities, but the U.S. government enlisted the aid of two unidentified family members. He has since divulged information that "has led to actionable intelligence that could help prevent terror attempts on U.S. soil," according to senior government officials.<sup>1</sup> He was charged on December 26, 2009, with two criminal counts and was additionally charged in a grand jury indictment on January 26, 2010. He faces life in prison plus a 90-year term if he is convicted on all charges. He was given a court-appointed attorney, but asked on September 13, 2010, to defend himself.<sup>2</sup> Incarcerated at the Federal Corrections Institution in Milan, Michigan, he awaits further legal proceedings.<sup>3</sup>

### 2. Nature of the adversary

Abdulmutallab was born on December 22, 1986, the 16th son of a wealthy Nigerian banker. He attended the best schools as a child and spent his high school years at the British International School in Lomé, Togo. Abdulmutallab's teachers described him as an ideal student, though his interactions with fellow students seemed odd. He was given the appellation "Alfa," which is a local term referring

---

<sup>1</sup> Ed Henry, "White House reveals secret cooperation with Abdulmutallab family," CNN, February 3, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Associated Press, "Man accused in bomb plot is allowed to be his own lawyer," *New York Times*, September 13, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> "Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab," Wikipedia.org, accessed November 20, 2010.

to Islamic clerics, because of his habit of preaching Islam to his classmates. He was also called “Pope” by some students.<sup>4</sup>

By 2005 posts began appearing on Facebook and the Islamic forum Gawaher.com under the name of Farouk1986. The biographical data listed by the poster and that of Abdulmutallab are a match. The posts of Farouk1986 give us a fair insight as to the inner workings of Abdulmutallab’s mind and perhaps to one of the vehicles of his radicalization.

Many of Farouk1986’s posts depict a lonely, sexually frustrated youth with dreams of jihad. Farouk1986 spoke of his years at school in Togo, where he despaired of not having any true Muslim friends. He repeatedly identified his own sexual misconduct, among other things that of failing to lower his gaze in the presence of unveiled women. He often wrote about marriage, how he longed for it but was still too young. He worried that some of his fantasies were “a bit worldly rather than concentrating in the hereafter.”<sup>5</sup>

While not explicit in his posts, it is entirely possible that Farouk1986 began associating his sexual desires with dreams of jihad. A post on January 28, 2005, explained how “the hair of a woman can easily arouse a man,” and he fretted that it was necessary for him to fantasize about “Islamic stuff.” Less than one month later he detailed a fantasy about how “the great jihad will take place, how the muslims will win insha Allah and rule the whole world, and establish the greatest empire once again!!!”<sup>6</sup> Shortly after this post, Farouk1986 wrote about Abdullah el-Faisal, a radical Muslim cleric imprisoned in the UK for urging his followers to murder Jews, Hindus, and Americans. This is the first clear link between Farouk1986 and radical Islam.

Abdulmutallab in the same year began attending the University College of London, where he pursued a degree in Mechanical Engineering and Business Finance. He was the head of the university’s Islamic Society. In January 2007 he hosted a “War on Terror Week” which featured former Guantanamo Bay detainees, human rights activists, and discussion on jihad in Islam.

Abdulmutallab reportedly came to the attention of MI5 at this time for his communications with Islamic extremists, but whether from lack of evidence or from Abdulmutallab’s departure from the university, it appears that there was no further investigation by British intelligence services.

One such Islamist extremist was the American-born Anwar al-Awlaki, a radical imam who is currently thought to be based in Yemen. He is also accused of being one of al-Qaeda’s top recruiters. Al-Awlaki has ties to several of the September 11 hijackers, the 2005 London subway plot, a 2006 Toronto terrorist cell, the 2007 Fort Dix plot, and the 2009 Fort Hood shooter.<sup>7</sup> It appears that al-Awlaki recruited Abdulmutallab to jihad. During a visit to Yemen in 2009, ostensibly to study Arabic, Abdulmutallab overstayed his student visa and dropped out of contact with his parents. He told them that they should never

---

<sup>4</sup> Mark Hosenball, “The radicalization of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab,” *Newsweek*, January 2, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Greene, “Sex torment drove him nuts,” *New York Post*, December 31, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Guy Chazan, “Web offers more clues on suspect,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> “Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab,” Wikipedia.org.

expect to see him again. According to Yemeni authorities, he quit attending the language school in Sana'a and reportedly traveled to a house owned and operated by al-Awlaki in the Shabwah Mountains.<sup>8</sup> It was here that he received training and equipment that would be used in his Christmas Day attempt. ABC World News in April 2010 aired a video produced by Al-Qaeda in Yemen depicting Abdulmutallab and others firing weapons at Western and Jewish symbols. The broadcast also included a martyrdom statement “justifying his actions against ‘the Jews and Christians and their agents.’” It is unknown when these videos were first recorded.<sup>9</sup>

While it is most likely that Abdulmutallab harbored the seeds of Islamist extremism before his contact with al-Awlaki, there has been no evidence to indicate that he planned on carrying out any kind of action based on those seeds. It is not until Abdulmutallab's reported contact with al-Awlaki during his initial visit to Yemen in 2005 that his frustrations and fantasies found their outlet and resolved for violence.

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the umbrella organization directing al-Qaeda in Yemen, is an extension of Osama bin-Laden's larger al-Qaeda group. It was founded in 2009 by one of bin Laden's personal secretaries and is a combination of al-Qaeda's Saudi and Yemeni efforts. Anwar al-Awlaki is thought to be one of the senior commanders of AQAP.<sup>10</sup> Abdulmutallab's case is a sterling example of the group's ability and willingness to exploit the feelings of loneliness and frustration in an otherwise nonviolent young man.

### 3. Motivation

AQAP released a video claiming responsibility for the Christmas Day plot shortly after Abdulmutallab was apprehended. The alleged reason was in response to U.S. and Yemeni efforts against AQAP in Yemen. It is also apparent that Abdulmutallab was a critic, to say the least, of U.S. and Western foreign policy. This is evidenced by the “War on Terror Week” that he organized at the University College of London, during which the speakers discussed the U.S.'s treatment of inmates at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility.

Judging from the Farouk1986 posts, Abdulmutallab long felt isolated and lonely. He despaired at having no Muslim friends. Abdulmutallab lashed out at his father's banking profession, calling it un-Islamic. He defended the Taliban in classroom discussions. While online he discussed his sexual frustrations in close proximity to fantasies about jihad. He wrote about at least one radical cleric in his web posts, and may have met with another on a paintball trip with the university Islamic society.

All of these events seem to be steps on a ladder to radicalization. Despite what may appear to be such a clear road map, it is difficult to ascertain when exactly Abdulmutallab crossed the threshold from extremist rhetoric to actual

---

<sup>8</sup> Adam Nossiter, “Lonely trek to radicalism for terror suspect,” *New York Times*, January 16, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Cole et al., “Underwear Bomber: New video of training, martyrdom statements,” ABC News, April 26, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> “Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula,” Wikipedia.org.

violence. Anwar al-Awlaki seems to have taken a particularly vulnerable youth and channeled his energies toward violence. Despite AQAP's claim of responsibility, the group simply took advantage of what was already there, namely Abdulmutallab's search for a pressure release. This is to say that while the stated motivation of the Christmas Day plot was to respond to U.S. and Yemeni campaigns against AQAP, it is possible that Abdulmutallab wanted to strike something, anything, and AQAP gave him the best opportunity and concrete reasons to do so.

#### 4. Goals

Abdulmutallab's immediate goal was the destruction of Flight 253 via the explosive compound hidden in his underwear. This display was apparently meant to further al-Qaeda's anti-Western and anti-Israel jihad. The immediate stated goal was to stop the joint U.S.-Yemeni campaign against AQAP in Yemen. It is difficult to see, however, how the destruction of a single U.S. jetliner was to bring about such change. AQAP presumably intended to widen its campaign against America, and some of this can be gleaned from interviews of Abdulmutallab while in custody, "where he told them [U.S. agents] that he was one of many bombers being groomed by the Yemeni al-Qaeda affiliate to attack American-bound aircraft."<sup>11</sup> The strategy seems aimed at forcing the U.S. to effect some massive change in the face of a tide of terrorism. The feasibility of such a strategy can be questioned and may even prove counterproductive.

#### 5. Plans for violence

Abdulmutallab boarded Flight 253 with 80 grams of PETN sewn into his underwear. The explosives were hidden near his groin and thus escaped detection. He attempted to ignite the explosive material with a syringe of liquid acid as the plane descended into the Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport; however, the acid failed to make proper contact with the PETN and instead set Abdulmutallab's leg as well as the plane's interior wall on fire.

The plan was simple. The explosive was not. According to a CNN report, PETN is a powerful explosive in the same family as nitroglycerine. It is a fine white powder that is actually very stable until ignited. Because of its composition, PETN is very transportable and easily concealed. He was also traveling with a syringe filled with what is believed to have been liquid acid to be used as the igniter. Experts believe that the acid was meant to cause a chemical reaction that would ignite the otherwise inactive PETN. The design of such an ignition mechanism would have taken some expertise.<sup>12</sup>

The identity of the actual bombmaker is unknown, but it is unlikely to have been Abdulmutallab himself. It is believed that he received the materials for his attack during his time at Anwar al-Awlaki's compound in the Shabwah Mountains in Yemen.

---

<sup>11</sup> Giles Whittell and Adam Fresco, "I'm the first of many, warns airline 'bomber' Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab," *The Times*, December 29, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> "PETN: The powder at the center of airline terror alert," CNN.com, December 29, 2009.

Similar syringes were found with what appear to have been bombs in packages addressed to Chicago synagogues. The packages were being transported by plane and were intercepted by authorities in October 2010. U.S. officials reported that the packages bore the hallmark of AQAP and cited that “AQAP has shown a strong interest, and regrettably skill, in dealing with PETN.” One official was further quoted as saying that the Christmas Day bombmaker and that of the October plot was likely the same.<sup>13</sup>

There are differing reports on whether or not the explosive charge from 80 grams of PETN would have been sufficient to pierce the aircraft’s fuselage. According to the *Washington Post*, federal sources say that the explosives could have “blown a hole in the side” of the “aircraft if it had been detonated.”<sup>14</sup> UK explosives expert Sidney Alford agrees, though the size of any theoretical hole has not been determined.<sup>15</sup>

On the other hand, a test conducted by the BBC resulted only in window damage. It is possible that this damage would have depressurized the hull of the aircraft, but it is difficult to know for sure as the test was conducted at ground level.<sup>16</sup> The area in which both reports agree is that the bomb itself was not powerful enough to destroy the aircraft. It may have blown a hole in the craft’s side and depressurized the cabin, but the explosive itself would not have consumed the entire aircraft.

One thing is certain: Abdulmutallab was willing to die to accomplish his mission. All indications are that he had planned to die for some time. His martyrdom video had been recorded and was subsequently released by AQAP. Beyond a second video of training with small arms weapons, we do not know who trained him and to what extent he was trained. It is unlikely that he would have been able to carry out his bombing attempt without assistance from AQAP.

Why Flight 253 was chosen as Abdulmutallab’s target is still unknown.

## 6. Role of informants

Informants did not factor into the case against Abdulmutallab, primarily because there was no case until after he attempted to destroy Flight 253. His father did approach officials at the U.S. Embassy in Lagos, Nigeria, on November 19, 2009. He voiced his concern that his son might possibly be associating with extremists. He had no knowledge of any terror plots, however. Abdulmutallab’s name was duly entered into the National Counterterrorism Center’s (NCTC) Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment database. Unfortunately this database did not communicate with the FBI’s Terrorist Screening Database, and thus the name was not placed on the No Fly List.

## 7. Connections

---

<sup>13</sup> From “Explosives” section, CNN.com, November 4, 2010. “‘Murderous’ PETN links terror plots,” CNN.

<sup>14</sup> Carrie Johnson, “Explosives in Detroit terror case could have blown hole in airplane, sources say,” *Washington Post*, December 29, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> “PETN: The powder at the center of airline terror alert,” CNN.

<sup>16</sup> “Boeing 747 survives simulation bomb blast,” BBC, March 4, 2010.



It is unlikely that Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab would have been able to carry out his plot without the aid of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. More specifically, American-born radical imam Anwar al-Awlaki played a critical role in recruiting and equipping him.

Al-Awlaki has been given the moniker “the bin Laden of the internet,” according to Al Arabiyah Television.<sup>17</sup> Born in 1971 in Las Cruces, New Mexico, al-Awlaki’s sermons have been attended by a “who’s who” of terrorist personalities. At least two of the 9/11 hijackers met with him privately. U.S. intelligence intercepted electronic communications between him and the Fort Hood shooter, Nidal Malik Hasan. His exploits have been significant enough for President Obama to order the targeted killing of al-Awlaki, the first U.S. citizen to be placed on this list.<sup>18</sup>

Abdulmutallab allegedly first met with al-Awlaki in 2005 while Abdulmutallab was in Yemen to study Arabic. At that time al-Awlaki was delivering lectures in Sana’a. It is unclear whether the two met privately in 2005, but the Washington Post indicates that the two exchanged a large number of communications during the year prior to Abdulmutallab’s attempted attack.<sup>19</sup> In October 2009 Abdulmutallab traveled to a house owned and operated by al-Awlaki in the Shabwah Mountains of Yemen. There he received equipment and training in the use of explosives. He confessed to authorities that al-Awlaki had given him religious guidance and had aided him in planning his attack. Some sources claiming to have spoken with al-Awlaki report that the cleric approved of Abdulmutallab’s actions but did not have a hand in planning them or encouraging Abdulmutallab.<sup>20</sup>

It is unlikely that Abdulmutallab would have been able to procure PETN, the highly explosive substance used in his attempted attack, without the assistance of an organized terrorist group. Such help came from AQAP, with al-Awlaki at its head. It is furthermore unclear if Abdulmutallab would have resorted to violence at all without al-Awlaki’s alleged encouragement. He may have merely remained a frustrated college student fantasizing about jihad, but never acting on his impulses. We will never know.

## **8. Relation to the Muslim community**

The Muslim community had little impact of Abdulmutallab’s progression toward violence. While it is true that he attended somewhat extreme sermons at various mosques, he studied Arabic at a language institute in Sana’a, and he hosted certain radicals while president of the University College of London’s Islamic Society, he often despaired on the internet that he had no Muslim friends. He felt isolated and alone, which made him a more appealing target for

---

<sup>17</sup> Aamer Madhani, “Cleric al-Awlaki dubbed ‘bin Laden of the internet,’” *U.S.A Today*, August 24, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> “Anwar al-Awlaki,” Wikipedia.org, accessed November 20, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Dan MacDougall et al., “Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab: one boy’s journey to jihad,” *Sunday Times*, January 3, 2010. Carrie Johnson et al., “Obama vows to repair intelligence gaps behind Detroit airplane incident,” *Washington Post*, December 30, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> “Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab,” Wikipedia.org.

recruitment by certain extremists, but the Muslim community writ large seemed unaware of his intentions.

Some passenger accounts do place a second man with Abdulmutallab at the airport in Amsterdam on the day of his attempt. Two eyewitness accounts describe a well-dressed man, possibly of Indian descent, who helped Abdulmutallab board Flight 253 without a passport, telling the gate official that Abdulmutallab was a Sudanese refugee and that the airline often allowed Sudanese refugees to fly without passports.<sup>21</sup> The Dutch counterterrorism agency reported that Abdulmutallab presented a valid Nigerian passport and was thus allowed to board the plane. Authorities examined hours of security footage and found no evidence of the supposed accomplice. After initially discounting the passenger accounts, authorities have reportedly begun searching for a man who may have helped Abdulmutallab change planes after landing in Amsterdam from Lagos. The man may have been present to ensure that Abdulmutallab did not get cold feet, according to ABC News.<sup>22</sup> As of this writing there have been no further developments regarding the supposed accomplice.

The extent of the involvement of the Muslim community seems to be that of Anwar al-Awlaki, a radical imam and recruiter for al-Qaeda.

## 9. Depiction by authorities

The Christmas Day attempt was understandably taken very seriously by authorities. A man carrying an explosive device was able to pass through security scanners and board a U.S.-bound plane. He was nearly able to ignite his explosives and perhaps bring down the aircraft. He was apprehended by a neighboring passenger and by the flight crew. Following the plane's landing, each passenger was thoroughly screened and questioned by law enforcement.<sup>23</sup> New measures have been adopted at some airports to involve full body scans of prospective passengers.

Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano initially praised the transportation security system for its effectiveness, though Abdulmutallab was able to pass through screening with his device in his underwear. She quickly retracted her statement after significant public backlash.<sup>24</sup> President Obama held several news conferences discussing the case and numerous congressional hearings have been conducted. All in all, Abdulmutallab's attempted bombing was taken very seriously by authorities, who recognized how closely they had come to disaster.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Paul Egan, "Atty. says he saw man try to help Nigerian onto flight without a passport," *Detroit News*, December 29, 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Esposito et al., "Female suicide bombers may be heading here from Yemen," ABC News, January 22, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Roey Rosenblith, "Over Detroit skies," *Huffington Post*, December 27, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Peter Baker and Scott Shane, "Obama seeks to reassure U.S. after bombing attempt," *New York Times*, December 28, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> A second Nigerian man was apparently being watched by authorities on December 25, 2009. Emmanuel Chukwu, a 41-year old engineer, shared Abdulmutallab's flight itinerary. He was subjected to six hours of additional screening after Flight 253 landed in Detroit. His name reportedly was found in TECS, a large database that enables customs and border enforcement to

## 10. Coverage by the media

Domestic press was outraged that Abdulmutallab was even allowed near a U.S.-bound airplane. The media repeatedly accused the U.S. Intelligence Community of a failure to connect the dots. Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano was criticized for her comments regarding the effectiveness of airport security, even though Abdulmutallab was able to board Northwest Flight 253 undetected. She later retracted her statements, but significant damage was done.

Following Abdulmutallab's father's visit to Lagos on November 19, 2009, in which he worried that his son was in Yemen and associating with radicals, Abdulmutallab's name was put into a database maintained by the NCTC. This database, however, did not communicate with a database operated by the FBI which controls the U.S.'s No Fly List. In congressional testimony, Patrick Kennedy, an undersecretary for management at the State Department, reported that State wished to revoke Abdulmutallab's visa but was told to desist by other U.S. intelligence agencies. The stated reason was that Abdulmutallab was part of a larger investigation of terrorist organizations. The revocation of his visa would have the potential to disrupt the investigation.<sup>26</sup> There has been no further information regarding this communication between State and other U.S. intelligence agencies.

## 11. Policing costs

The only costs associated to the policing of the Christmas Day plot are those of court and incarceration costs. The press has not reported on any earlier investigation that would explain Patrick Kennedy's congressional testimony, and so a judgment about its costs cannot be made. There have almost certainly been investigations into AQAP writ large, but none specifically associated with Abdulmutallab.

As to the court and incarceration costs, Abdulmutallab is currently housed at the Federal Correction Institute in Milan, Michigan, where he is awaiting further legal proceedings.

Some indirect costs can be applied to the Christmas Day plot. Since Abdulmutallab's failed attack there have been numerous congressional inquiries into the alleged intelligence failure, political capital has been spent as politicians and administration officials wrestled with blame, and President Obama in April 2010 authorized the targeted killing of Abdulmutallab's facilitator, Anwar al-Awlaki.<sup>27</sup> All of these operations and costs can be attributed to Abdulmutallab's attempted attack.

---

monitor suspicious passengers for red flags that may necessitate further investigation. He was in no way involved with Abdulmutallab or the Christmas Day bombing attempt. This as well as further information on Emmanuel Chukwu can be found in Abbie Boudreau, et al., "Authorities were watching different Nigerian on Christmas Day flight," CNN, January 22, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> "Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab," Wikipedia.org. "Flight 253 Patrick F. Kennedy Testimony," Youtube.com, accessed November 20, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Scott Shane, "U.S. approves targeted killing of American cleric," *New York Times*, April 6, 2010.

## 12. Relevance of the internet

The internet certainly aided Abdulmutallab in his contact with Anwar al-Awlaki. It is unclear whether or not this is the first forum in which he encountered the radical imam. Fox News reported that documents found in his flat in London revealed an interest in al-Awlaki's blog and internet pages, but did not demonstrate that the two had spoken one-on-one.<sup>28</sup> Once initial contact with al-Awlaki was made, most of Abdulmutallab's interactions with him were made via means other than the internet. Abdulmutallab traveled to Yemen for training and equipping by al-Awlaki.

The internet's best use in this case is in that of assessing Abdulmutallab's mental state. If internet posts made by Farouk1986 beginning in 2005 are indeed those of Abdulmutallab, we can piece together a rough image of the young man who would become a terrorist.

## 13. Are we safer?

It is clear that public safety has directly improved since the apprehension of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab. Shortcomings may remain and should constantly be reassessed for the implementation of better safety and communication measures. Full-body scanners have been installed in some airports, but many remain without.

Media and public reaction has been strong enough in this case to have evoked some changes from the U.S. administration. Several months after the Christmas Day plot, President Obama accepted the resignation of Admiral Dennis Blair (ret.), the Director of National Intelligence. While Admiral Blair was obviously not directly responsible for the intelligence failures leading up to the attempted attack, several other plots had been nearly or actually carried out under his tenure. These include the 2010 Times Square bombing attempt and the 2009 Fort Hood shootings.<sup>29</sup>

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula remains a threat, however. The Christmas Day plot has demonstrated to the world that AQAP has the capacity for international attacks. A renewed effort to decapitate the group and apprehend its members will need to be made to ensure long term public safety.

## 14. Conclusions

If successful, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's attack might have slightly damaged the airline industry in the short term, but it is unlikely that it would have had any lasting impact. The U.S. economy, and U.S. citizens themselves, have proven to be remarkably resilient to terrorism. Because of the sheer size of the economy and the constant barrage of violent news reported to the American people by the 24 hour news cycle, an attack would need to be of an extreme magnitude to achieve any significant impact. This is not to say that such an attack is impossible, however, large-scale attacks tend to be more complex, with more opportunities for thwarting by authorities.

---

<sup>28</sup> Catharine Herridge, "Investigators recover SIM cards during searches of homes tied to Abdulmutallab," Fox News, December 28, 2009.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Mazzetti, "Facing a rift, U.S. spy chief to step down," *New York Times*, May 20, 2010.

Abdulmutallab traveled down the road to terrorism as a result of misplaced frustrations and opposition to what he perceived as Western policy regarding Islam. It was not difficult for Anwar al-Awlaki to hijack Abdulmutallab's frustrations and target them against the United States. All that was required was training, equipping, and planning. The Christmas Day attempt was a near miss, a clear sign that law enforcement and intelligence agencies must remain vigilant and work with their international partners to fight extremism wherever it lives. Any countermeasure that is adopted has the potential to be circumvented. Security personnel should employ creativity in their approach to combating terrorist tactics in order to break the reactionary cycle of security improvement post facto.

The underwear bomber's attempt may have been averted had the UK and the U.S. coordinated more closely on visa issues. Perhaps closer cooperation is needed to more thoroughly review all visa applications, or at least the suspicious ones, that are filed in both countries.

There are few ways that a government can combat the frustrations of youth, especially one as tightly wound as Abdulmutallab and his apparent online personality, Farouk1986. It is the point at which those frustrations evolve into extremism that authorities are more capable. Radical clerics and imams can be monitored without insulting moderate voices. If ties between Abdulmutallab and al-Awlaki were suspected before Christmas Day 2009, they should have been investigated. Anyone tied to a known radical like al-Awlaki should get at least a cursory examination.

One of the most significant lessons to be drawn from this case is the information overload of our intelligence and law enforcement agencies. Mountains of tips and walk-ins, like Abdulmutallab's father, are sifted through daily, most of which turn out to be inaccurate or incorrect. A way needs to be found to ease the burden on our protectors so that repeat performances of the Christmas Day attempt do not come so close to fruition.