

January 15, 2010

Failed States, al Qaeda and ‘Lone Wolf’ Airline Plots; The Evolving Face of the Terrorist Landscape

“This is no idle danger, no hypothetical threat.” These are the recent words of the President of the United States suggesting that al Qaeda is plotting new attacks from their bases of operation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. While terrorism still rages in these regions, the most recent attack on the homeland came from an entirely different base of operation. Clearly, the new decade is starting as the last one began — with al Qaeda creating a climate of fear, through an attempted attack on an airliner and from a largely unanticipated source.

Prior to the bombing of the USS Cole in the port of Aden on October 12, 2000, little attention was directed toward Yemen, the most destitute nation in the Arab world. The explosives for this attack were purchased in Yemen, and the attackers and their accomplices were predominantly Yemenis. More recently, this country — the ancestral home of Osama bin Laden — surfaced again as a potential major player in the pantheon of terrorism. The American government had intelligence suggesting a possible attack on the United States during the holiday season, and more specific information indicating al Qaeda was talking about “a Nigerian” being prepared for a terrorist attack.

Since the bombing of the USS Cole, Yemen has come under suspicion as a haven for al Qaeda and other militant Islamic groups. However, the plot to blow up a Northwest Airlines jetliner carrying 278 passengers and 11 crew members from Amsterdam to Detroit on December 25 has escalated this suspicion to a dangerous level, highlighting a new and lethal ability by a branch of al Qaeda to attack the United States directly. Over the past number of months, counterterrorism professionals expressed concern over the capability of al Qaeda affiliates in North Africa, Yemen, Iraq and Somalia to attack American and Western targets in their regions, but — before this most recent attack — downplayed the threat to the United States from these al Qaeda affiliates. The primary risk is still considered to be emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan, where most of America’s resources are focused. However, recent foiled and uncovered plots linked to Yemen and Somalia are challenging this perception. This issue of The Lipman Report® will discuss the ongoing al Qaeda threat from multiple havens abroad, the growing vulnerability of “failed states” to al Qaeda activity, and the new version of a terrorist — a radicalized trans-national suicide bomber in the person of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who seems to have lived a life totally different from who he was,

moving in the shadows and disclosing little, even to those who counted him as a friend.

Yemen — A Failed State

Yemen’s unrest, including a secessionist movement in the south and a civil war in the north, has offered al Qaeda an ideal hub, especially in the rugged rural and tribal regions where the government’s reach is diminishing. Yemen’s remote areas are notoriously lawless, while the country’s chaos has worsened in the past two years as the government continues to struggle with internal threats to its authority. With a weak government and powerful regional tribes, Yemen is also a relatively easy place for al Qaeda to operate; Al Qaeda has been skillful in making alliances with important tribes. Its borders remain unsecured, while tribal groups sympathetic to al Qaeda control many regions, allowing terrorists to move freely into, out of and around the country. To add to this cauldron of instability, guns and explosives are readily available from Yemen’s thriving arms market.

Financial pressures are further driving this country toward terrorism. Yemen is running out of oil, and the government’s dwindling finances have affected its ability to resist the influence of al Qaeda. The country has long served as a refuge for jihadists, in part because Yemen’s government welcomed returning Islamist fighters who had fought in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Reportedly, 2,000 Yemenis who were believed to have fought in Iraq insurgencies have returned to Yemen to continue the jihad. It is telling that the key actors in the story of al Qaeda’s rise in Yemen were leaders who were released from detention at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, had escaped from Yemeni prisons or were drawn to shelter in Yemen by a common cause and ideology. In fact, two former detainees from the Guantanamo detention facility in Cuba were among four suspected terrorists who may have helped plan the December 25 failed plot. The leader of the al Qaeda cell, Naser al-Wahishi; the military commander, Qassim al-Raime; the theological guide, Suleiman al-Rubaysh; and Anwar al-Awlaki — the al Qaeda Internet imam who reportedly was in contact with Major Nidal Malik Hasan, the Fort Hood shooter — all escaped or were released from Yemeni prisons. This legacy continues, and Yemen’s cell of al Qaeda, “al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula” (AQAP), has grown in strength and confidence, developing a capability beyond the other al Qaeda hubs. There is growing concern that al

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Qaeda will begin providing social and civil services to the people of Yemen on a scale that could challenge the distracted and anemic Yemen government for allegiance, as occurred with Hamas in Gaza.

While al Qaeda has morphed into a fractured network of small terrorist franchises strewn across Asia, the Middle East and Africa, a jihadist battleground is rising in Yemen amidst growing political upheaval and poverty. It has now been revealed that coordinated suicide bombing attacks targeting the American and British embassies in Sana, Yemen, on December 25 also were thwarted. There are very real concerns that al Qaeda could establish a regional base of operations in this country to train operatives and plot new attacks against the West, echoing the activities previously staged from another “failed state” — Afghanistan. Counterterrorism experts anticipating a terror resurgence cite evidence that pieces of al Qaeda are gathering strength in the failing states of Yemen and Somalia.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) claimed credit for the December 25 attack on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 to Detroit. The fact that a Yemen-based jihadist group chose to strike outside its region has driven headlines in the recent mainstream media. AQAP has set itself apart from other al Qaeda affiliates in recent months, demonstrating complex operations that rely on tactical innovation and expert operational leaders. Attempts such as the one on December 25 and the similar suicide mission against Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Nayef reflect that menacing skill, though fortunately each ultimately failed. The explosive mixture used in the attack on Prince Mohammed, the Saudi Deputy Minister of Interior, was the same one that Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab tried to ignite on the passenger jet approaching Detroit — and in each case the terrorist hid the mixture in his underwear.

AQAP started as al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. Its objective was to destabilize the Saudi government as part of al Qaeda’s larger strategic goal of creating an Islamic caliphate across the Middle East. After Riyadh cracked down on the jihadists beginning in 2004, the group lost most of its ability to operate in Saudi Arabia. The remnants were forced to relocate to Yemen, where they joined forces with al Qaeda in Yemen. This new group, AQAP, continues to pursue the goal of destabilizing the Saudi government. AQAP is strategically located in

Yemen, particularly in light of a growing resurgence of Islamist extremism in nearby Somalia and East Africa.

The fear that Yemen could become al Qaeda’s next operational base appears to be materializing, since there have been increasing Yemeni ties to plots against the United States. Most of the people involved in the 1998 East African embassy bombings either traveled through Yemen or used fraudulent Yemeni passports. Almost two years after the attack on the USS Cole, al Qaeda terrorists based in Yemen struck the Limburg, a French oil tanker off the coast of Yemen. Yemeni operatives have also admitted to transferring money to assist in the 9/11 plot. More recently, a Muslim man charged in the June 2009 killing of a soldier at a military recruiting center in Little Rock, Arkansas, had traveled to Yemen. Born in Memphis, Tennessee, Abdulhakim Mujahid Muhammad lived in Little Rock and stated at his arrest that he was angry at the United States military because of what it had done to Muslims in the past. And an American-born radical cleric in Yemen, Anwar al-Awlaki — described as an articulate window to jihadism for English speakers — has been linked to numerous terrorism suspects, including Nidal Hasan, the United States Army Major who faces murder charges in the November shooting deaths at Fort Hood, Texas.

Somalia: Another “Failed State”

Somalia, for all intents and purposes, is another “failed state,” tactically located across the Gulf of Aden from Yemen. Somalia has not had an effective central government since armed militias overthrew the former government more than 10 years ago, leading to the current chaos. Recently, senior leaders of the Shabab rebels — al Qaeda affiliates — promised to send their fighters beyond Somalia to Yemen. This group’s avowed goals signaled a notable shift in strategy — from an Islamic insurgency that has drawn foreign fighters to Somalia to one that aims to provide these trained militants to insurgencies abroad.

Also ominous is the emerging trend of alienated members of Somali diasporas embracing terrorism. Somali nationals were arrested in Minnesota in early 2009 after returning from fighting alongside al Shabab. In August 2009, two Somalis were arrested in Melbourne for planning a major suicide attack on an Australian army installation. The first American ever to carry out a suicide bombing did so in Somalia in October 2008, and another American died in a similar manner in 2009. Additionally,

sources reveal that a Somali man was arrested by African Union peacekeeping troops as he tried to board a commercial airliner in the capital of Mogadishu during November carrying powdered chemicals, liquid and a syringe — a case that bears chilling similarities to the Detroit airliner plot.

The Transitional Federal Government (TFG), Somalia's national government, is — in reality — a dysfunctional institution that has failed to garner much support from the population. Barricaded in a small corner of Mogadishu behind a wall of international peacekeepers, TFG to date has neither been able to stop the expansion of extremist forces throughout Somalia, nor prevent the formation of al Qaeda cells and training camps in the country.

The Phenomenon of Internet Imams

Details now surfacing regarding Major Hasan of the Fort Hood shootings seem to indicate he fits the category of the classic “Lone Wolf,” as does Abdulmutallab. Both acted alone, led relatively exemplary and moderately successful lives and almost never came to the attention of authorities. They were also both self-radicalized with the help of the Internet, had ongoing communication and physical contact with the radical cleric al-Awlaki — who inspired each of them separately — and managed to wreak havoc locally, without support from an overseas network. In the latest issue of *Sada al-Malahim* — the Internet magazine of the al Qaeda affiliate in Yemen — the group's leader, Naser al-Wahishi, praised the use of small bombs and conventional weapons to attack the enemy, in an uncanny foreshadowing of the havoc in Texas and the drama in Detroit.

The apparent ties between Major Hasan, the Nigerian Abdulmutallab and a radical American-born Yemeni imam have cast a spotlight on a world of charismatic clerics who wield their Internet celebrity to indoctrinate young Muslims with extremist ideology and recruit them for al Qaeda. Speaking in eloquent, often colloquial English, these Internet imams from the Middle East to Britain offer a televangelist's persuasive message of faith, purpose and a way forward to prepare uncommitted as well as devout worshipers to take the next step. People across the spectrum gravitate to these Internet figures. They offer something much more sinister than radical Islam — a more direct pipeline to al Qaeda operatives in

places like Yemen. Not just publicists, these imams function as talent spotters and pass the potential terrorists on to trainers and operational planners.

The Shoe Bomber and the Nigerian Plot

Eight years ago around the Christmas holidays, a similar scenario to the foiled Detroit airline operation unfolded. The names and locations are different, but the plot is eerily familiar. Richard Reid, a British passenger on a December 22, 2001, Boeing 767 flight from Paris to Miami, tried to light a fuse protruding from his shoe that was packed with enough explosives to blow a hole in the fuselage of the aircraft. As in the Detroit attempt, aircraft crew and passengers acted quickly to prevent the incident. Authorities first looked at Reid as a lone crackpot; he appeared to be acting alone, paid for a one-way ticket with cash and had no bags checked. His subsequent indictment, however, revealed that he had received training in al Qaeda camps in Afghanistan and that the bomb inside his shoe was a sophisticated device. European investigators eventually linked Reid to some of the best-known terrorist cells on the European continent. Reid also had recently traveled to Israel, Egypt and Turkey, scouting locations for terrorist attacks. He was converted to Islam in London and attended the Brixton and Finsbury Park mosques, ones notorious for the radicalism of their message and the sheer number of suspected terrorists who have worshiped there. Reid spent most of 1999 and 2000 at a madrasah — an Islamic school — in Pakistan, and then crossed the border to a terrorist camp in Afghanistan, not far from Kabul. The camp, called Khalden, specialized in welcoming recruits earmarked for operations in Europe or North America. Both attempted attacks demonstrated that the Muslim community in Europe has become a rich recruiting ground for Islamic extremists, and that many of the world's most dangerous terrorists who are capable of targeting the West are not in the Islamic world at all — but in the cities of Western Europe.

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab is accused of attempting to blow up a Northwest Airlines flight using a high explosive device containing 80 grams of PETN — also known as pentaerythritol — sewn into his underwear. Given the strategic proximity of his seat — 19A — seven to eight feet above the fuel tanks, it is likely that had he succeeded, the resulting explosion would have brought down the plane and killed the almost 300

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people aboard. He was indicted January 6 on charges that include attempted murder and trying to use a weapon of mass destruction. As with Reid, tragedy was averted because the detonator failed to work properly before fellow passengers jumped on the suspect. Abdulmutallab allegedly assembled the explosive device in the aircraft restroom and planned to detonate it with a syringe of chemicals. He was carrying a valid Nigerian passport and a current United States visa. Abdulmutallab told American investigators he received training from al Qaeda operatives in Yemen. Meanwhile, AQAP claimed in an Internet posting that it masterminded the attempted bombing.

Abdulmutallab, 23, was born a Nigerian Muslim and is the son of a wealthy banker. Why this amiable, privileged and devout — if disaffected — young man aspired to mass murder is unknown. However, investigators suspect that the road to radicalism ran less through Yemen, where he earlier studied Arabic and later prepared for a suicide mission, than through the Islamic hothouse of London. He studied at the prestigious University College from 2005 until 2009, arriving there during the unparalleled intellectual and religious fervor in Britain's Muslim community that occurred in the wake of the July 7, 2005, attacks on the London public transit system that killed 56 people. Internet postings purportedly written by Abdulmutallab suggest a fervently religious and lonely young man who fantasized about becoming a holy warrior. He was an impeccable student, incredibly polite and very hard-working, and gave no indications of extreme radical beliefs during this period — providing authorities with no warning of his violent intentions.

Lessons Learned

The 20th anniversary of the birth of al Qaeda last year was a reminder to its foes and followers that the group has created a lasting "brand." By surviving two decades, al Qaeda crossed a threshold formerly reached by such longstanding terrorist groups as the communist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Palestinian militant group Hamas. Even with bin Laden and his lieutenants in seclusion, al Qaeda has inspired new followers. In setting their sights lower and relying on lone suicide bombers, rather than on complicated plots with several confederates, these al Qaeda affiliates may also pose a threat that is harder to thwart than the massive operations of before — as the December 25 incident demonstrated.

It is an unbelievable and frightening fact that after 9/11, the 2001 shoe bomber and the December 25, 2009 event, it still remains possible for a terrorist to bring explosives on an airplane. Additionally, there still appears to be a dangerous lag in communication; intelligence available in Nigeria, London, Yemen and elsewhere did not move quickly enough through the system to block this most recent terrorist from boarding the flight. Although al Qaeda seems to be less cohesive than before, their organizations remain functional, and there is no guarantee that these groups won't increase in sophistication and effectiveness. It also appears that radical insurgents continue to focus on the global air transport system. Sadly, the defense mechanisms devised since 2001 remain ineffective, at least to some degree.

*The terrorist network is global and ethereal, in fact so disparate that locating a terrorist is like finding a needle in a haystack. The December 25 attempted airliner attack was a low-cost, low-risk operation, but had it succeeded, the psychological impact — not to mention the emotional one — would have been massive. Realistically, there is no simple solution to low-level terrorism that is carried out by a seemingly fragmented network of individuals and groups at unpredictable times and places. The United States Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has announced that anyone traveling through or from nations regarded as state sponsors of terrorism, along with other countries of interest, will be required to go through an enhanced screening that includes full-body pat-downs, carry-on luggage searches and explosive detection technology. Tactically, these implementations will be somewhat helpful, but it is clear that we need to redouble our efforts. There is little doubt that al Qaeda affiliates around the world are at this moment plotting more coordinated attacks against our transportation systems, and most likely in the hospitality and tourism areas as well. And on a more strategic front, drastic measures must be taken to prevent the terrorists and al Qaeda from establishing a base in a yet another "failed state," and from accessing weapons of mass destruction — the "sum of all fears" scenario. **The time for urgency is now.**®*



The Lipman Report Editors