

HSPI Commentary Series

NO LONGER ON AUTO-PILOT: AVIATION SECURITY AND INTELLIGENCE REFORM

HSPI Commentary 08

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Yesterday afternoon, President Obama made the latest in a series of statements regarding the attempted Christmas Day bombing. Taking personal responsibility, he set out three broad categories of error which compounded one another. Further, he identified four areas for additional steps, with the ultimate objective of better collecting, sharing, integrating, and analyzing intelligence.

Over time more details will undoubtedly become available as investigations continue and efforts to remedy the defects in this case unfold. What is clear, however, is that there was a multilevel systemic failure, in terms of both aviation security and our intelligence architecture.

The airport and the aircraft are, and should be, our last line of defense. Earlier links in the chain offered additional opportunities to stop Abdulmutallab in his tracks. The first fundamental failure was not taking the prudential step of revoking the suspect's visa; this was the easiest step to take, and for which sufficient hard intelligence from the suspect's own father was in the possession of the Department of State and the intelligence community. Had this been done, the question of watch-listing would have been moot.

In this particular instance, besides the hard intelligence that was not properly shared or prioritized, there were also many clues or risk factors that could have been acted upon at a later stage, even in the absence of specific intelligence tied to Abdulmutallab personally: a one-way ticket paid for in cash, a passenger without checked luggage on a long-haul flight, and so forth. Any one of these provided another layer of defense against even an unknown extremist and should have set off alarm bells for those who came into contact with Abdulmutallab or his information at the airport.

Admittedly, though by themselves these factors may not have met thresholds then in place with airlines and Dutch authorities so as to deny Abdulmutallab's boarding the aircraft at a



foreign airport, better and faster analysis might have led authorities to the hard intelligence already in the system. To be fair, Abdulmutallab was reportedly targeted for secondary inspection by U.S. Customs and Border Protection in Detroit; but by the time this occurred it was too late as he was already in mid-air. This layer of protection should never have been reached in this instance; but making improvements here may be crucial in helping us next time to interdict individuals with no criminal background or known affiliation with any terrorist or extremist organization. Al Qaeda and its affiliates have placed a premium on recruiting such persons.

Body imaging devices and other technological tools, while potentially helpful, are not a silver bullet solution. At best they are an effective additional element in a multilayered defense; but they cannot replace the wise exercise of discretion and judgment by those who operate at the tip of the spear—whether at the ticket counter, airport security checkpoints, consular offices or elsewhere.

Profiling continues to be a dirty word. Yet the signs and indicators, meaning suspicious behaviors – and yes, biographic commonalities – were clear in this instance. Moving forward, it is crucial that we not let such hints slip through our fingers. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which we would be handed as many “gifts” as we were this time.

The challenge is magnified exponentially by the fact we face a thinking adversary that adapts continually in response to our own actions and reactions, in order to expose and exploit our vulnerabilities. To thwart our opponents, we must insert unpredictability into the system so that opportunities to game it are drastically decreased.

If we are serious about stopping our adversaries in their tracks however, we will need solid intelligence, the capacity to share and appreciate it effectively, and the ability to operationalize it to our frontline people capable of making an interdiction. If 9/11 was a failure of imagination, and Katrina was a failure of initiative, then Abdulmutallab was a failure of synthesis and analysis on our part. The information was largely there, but it was not pieced together in a way that supported sufficiently timely action.

Intelligence is the lifeblood of counterterrorism. Yet we are encumbered by a huge bureaucracy with sixteen constituent components that together still form a whole that is something far less than a cohesive community. At the same time, the workforce in this area, meaning our analytical core, is young and unseasoned.

Compounding the situation is the international dimension: foreign intelligence. Are we obtaining all that we need from our partners beyond borders? Limited information is currently available on this count; and to an extent, many unknowns may remain so forever, at

least to the public. In this respect our intelligence professionals are easy targets, as they are duty-bound to remain silent.

Accountability is a bedrock principle. In the intelligence domain, however, we owe it to those in the field, who are a crucial weapon in our arsenal against al Qaeda, to enunciate clear expectations ahead of time. A chilling effect based on fear of future prosecution may inhibit proactive sharing and aggressive actions while encouraging bureaucratic punting and backside-covering. Accountability must also extend to all government agencies involved in the failures leading up to the Detroit attack. While Mr. Brennan and Ms. Napolitano stood front and center at yesterday's press conference, notably absent were representatives of the Department of the State and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, who by all appearances bear at least equal responsibility.

At the end of the day, a multilayered, frontloaded security posture is our best defense against those who wish to do us harm. The actions specified by the President, his willingness to accept that the buck stops with him, and his stated intent to hold himself and others accountable by measuring progress towards these ends, are crucial. What gets measured gets done.

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