

“The Attempted Christmas Day 2009 Attack on Northwest Flight 253”



Report #25 in the “Target: America” Series

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Overview

- On a flight from Amsterdam, The Netherlands to Detroit, Michigan on December 25, 2009, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a 23-year old Nigerian national educated in Britain, attempted to detonate an explosive device sewn into his underwear.
- The device, comprised of Pentaerythritol Tetranitrate (PETN) and Triacetone Triperoxide (TATP), failed to explode, and instead created a small fire that burned Abdulmutallab and created substantial smoke in the interior of the aircraft.
- Abdulmutallab was subdued by a fellow passenger.
- He was taken into custody by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and later questioned by the FBI.
- He was not on a terrorism watch list, but was known to the Intelligence Community prior to the attempted attack.

Attack Attempt



- Umar Faruk Abdulmutallab had traveled through five countries in the two weeks prior to his flight to the U.S.
- His last journey originated in Ghana on December 24, 2009; he flew from there to Nigeria, then to Amsterdam, The Netherlands, where he boarded Northwest Airlines Flight 253 bound for Detroit. The aircraft was operated by Delta Airlines.
- As the airplane approached the Detroit Metropolitan Airport, Abdulmutallab attempted to detonate his explosive device using a syringe.

- On December 7, 2009, Abdulmutallab flew from Yemen to Ethiopia. From there, on December 9th, he flew to Ghana, where he bought his Lagos to Amsterdam to Detroit tickets.
- Abdulmutallab purchased his round-trip ticket from Nigeria to Detroit at a KLM office in Ghana on December 16, 2009.
- He paid for the \$2,831 ticket in cash. Paying cash for an airline ticket is not unusual in Africa and would not tend to raise suspicion, according to the Department of Homeland Security.
- Abdulmutallab flew from Ghana to Nigeria on December 24, 2009, then on to Amsterdam on the same day.



Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab booking photo - 12/2009



- According to witnesses, Abdulmutallab was in the bathroom on the plane for approximately twenty minutes before his attempt to detonate the explosive device.
- When he returned to his seat he said that his stomach was upset. He then covered himself with a blanket.
- Passengers heard a loud bang, which was described as sounding like a firecracker or a big balloon popping.
- Some witnesses observed that Abdulmutallab's pant leg and the wall of the aircraft were on fire.
- Witnesses stated that approximately thirty seconds after the explosion was heard, smoke billowed down the aisle.

- Witnesses observed that Abdulmutallab remained calm during the incident and also during the subsequent commotion when fellow passengers extinguished the fire and dragged him up to the first class cabin.
- When a flight attendant asked Abdulmutallab what he had in his pocket, he replied matter-of-factly, “explosive device.”



Image shows syringe Abdulmutallab used in his attempt to detonate the explosives sewn into his underwear

Source: ABC News



The device contained approximately 80 grams of explosive materials. Abdulmutallab claimed to authorities that he had procured the explosives in Yemen.

- There were 279 passengers and 11 crew members aboard the aircraft.
- Experts stated that if the device had detonated successfully it could have blown a hole in the wall of the aircraft.
- Abdulmutallab was indicted by a grand jury on January 6, 2010. The six charges against him include attempted murder and attempted use of a weapon of mass destruction.



Jasper Schuringa, a Dutch passenger on Flight 253, initially tackled Abdulmutallab and enlisted fellow passengers to extinguish the flames with water. Schuringa suffered burns on his hand.

Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) Claim of Responsibility



- On December 28, 2009, Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) issued claimed responsibility for the Christmas Day attack. The statement praised Abdulmutallab's ability to evade the sophisticated security technology in place in Western airports.
- The statement also claimed that the explosives had been tested and the device was viable, but that a glitch occurred when Abdulmutallab reached his target.
- In an October 2009 statement, AQAP also discussed the value of small explosives and the ease with which they can be fabricated.

Abdulmutallab's Background



Abdulmutallab, 18, on a class trip to London
Source: AP

- Abdulmutallab grew up in Nigeria, the youngest of 16 children in a privileged family.
- His father was the chairman of the First Bank of Nigeria.
- He grew up feeling isolated and lonely and had few close friends.
- Abdulmutallab attended high school at a British international school in West Africa.
- His teacher described Abdulmutallab's religious views as "over-the-top", even when he was in high school.



Abdulmutallab studied the Koran at the Rabi'atu Matallib Institute, in Nigeria, which was named for his grandfather and financed by his father



- There were few Muslims in Abdulmutallab's high school.
- He organized Islamic study circles and prayer sessions, but complained that fellow students were not serious about religion.
- He frequently posted to www.gawahar.com, using the handle "Farouk1986."
- At the age of 18, he described his sense of isolation and his conflict over his sexual desires in one of his online postings.
- He discussed wanting to get married, but said that "social norms" would not allow him to marry at such an early age.
- He wrote that he would go to college in London or in California. There is no further information indicating he applied to a California college. He complained on his internet posts that his SAT scores were low.

Farouk1986

Jan 28 2005, 09:57 PM

Post #1

Assalamu Alaykum brothers and sisters,

I have several dilemmas i want to get out of and this has made me lonely. As i intent to write a lot, i suggest for anyone who gets board of my long desperate talk to just read the bit they can and advise me even it is just a sentence. I will find it very beneficaill and comforting to get help from muslim brothers and sisters.

Firstly i will start with a bit of my background and then the dilemmas. I am a boarding student in a school with few muslims. For some years now, i hav been doing some da'wah, mainly enjoining good and forbiding evil, and jihadinnafs, trying to become closer to Allah. But i have been facing several problems.

First of all, i have no friend. Not because i do not socialise, etc but because either people do not want to get too close to me as they go partying and stuff while i dont, or they are bad people who befriend me and influence me to do bad things. Hence i am in a situation where i do not have a friend, i have no one to speak too, no one to consult, no one to support me and i feel depressed and lonely. i do not know what to do.

And then i think this loneliness leads me to other problems. As i get lonely, the natural sexual drive awakens and i struggle to control it, sometimes leading to minor sinful activities like not lowering the gaze.

And this problem makes me want to get married to avoid getting aroused. The Prophet (S) advised young men to fast if they cant get married but it has not been helping me much and i seriously dont want to wait for years before i get married. But i am only 18, (just going to university, insha Allah in London or California). i have not started searching for prospective partners because It would be difficult for me to get married due to social norms of getting to the late 20's when one has a degree, a job, a house, etc before getting married, plus parents are reluctunt to give their daughters in marriage to an 18 year old and sisters are also not normally willing to marry an 18 year old. Anyway alhamdulillah my parents i know could help me financially should i get married, even though i think they are also not going to be in favour of early marriage.

The last thing i want to talk about is my dilemma between liberalism and extremism. The Prpphet (S) said religion is easy and anyone who tries to overburden themselves will find it hard and will not be able to continue. So anytime i relax, i deviate sometimes and then when i strive hard, i get tired of what i am doing i.e. memorising the quran, etc. How should one put the balance right?

Thank you for anyone whoo reaches this stage of reading my problem. May Allah reward you for reading and reward you more for helping. Ameen

[↑ TOP](#)[+ QUOTE](#)

- Abdulmutallab attended University College London (UCL), where he studied mechanical engineering.
- In his first year, Abdulmutallab became the president of the University's Islamic Society. In his second year, he became the Society's Ameer, according to a short autobiographical statement attributed to him (the document is linked in "References" at the end of this slide presentation). The president of the ULC society is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the Society and the Ameer is the ultimate decision maker.



- In January 2009, Abdulmutallab went to the University of Wallongong in Dubai, a satellite campus of an Australian university, to study for his master's degree in international business.
- During this time, Abdulmutallab cut ties with his family in Nigeria, prompting his father's November 2009 meeting with American authorities at the U.S. embassy in Nigeria during which he expressed concern over his son's extremist views.
- He stayed in Dubai until June 2009.
- In May 2009, British authorities denied Abdulmutallab's request for a new student visa because the school where he stated he would study "life coaching" was not accredited and did not have the authority to sponsor student visas.
- UK authorities have shut down thousands of fictitious schools that were created to help foreign students acquire visas.
- In August 2009, Abdulmutallab went to Yemen, ostensibly to study at Iman University. It was his second trip to Yemen.

Terrorist Connections, Training, and Radical Threads

- Yemeni authorities confirmed that Abdulmutallab had been in the country between the fall of 2004 and the spring of 2005, and again from early August until early December 2009.
- The school he attended during his second trip, Iman University, is run by Sheikh Abdul Majeed al Zindani.
- In 2004, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Zindani as a terrorist, noting his connections to Al-Qaida.
- The American Al-Qaida-affiliated cleric, Anwar al Awlaki, served as vice president of the Charitable Society for Social Welfare (CSSW) while he was living in San Diego, California. CSSW was founded by Sheikh al Zindani.
- Awlaki left the United States for Yemen in March 2002 and became affiliated with Zindani's Iman University.



Sheikh Abdul Majeed al Zindani



Anwar al Awlaki



Still from video released by the Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula showing Abdulmutallab at a training camp. The video also has a videotaped statement from Abdulmutallab explaining why it is necessary to attack the West.

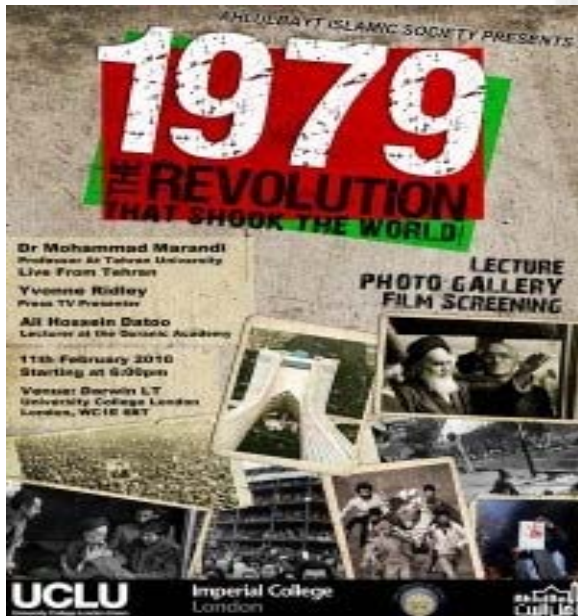
Source: ABC News

- During his first trip, Abdulmutallab claims, in his short autobiography, that he studied Arabic intensively in one-on-one courses, and that he was able to read the Koran efficiently without referring to the English translation by the end of his course. He also described having traveled through Yemen during that time to sight see.
- Al Malahim Media Foundation, Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula's media arm, released a video in late April 2010 showing Abdulmutallab training.
- The video also showed Abdulmutallab speaking in Arabic, justifying his reasons for participating in a violent attack; he stated that it is the obligation of all Muslims to fight because the enemies of Islam are in the Arabian Peninsula with their armies.



British Islamist television personality, Yvonne Ridley

- University College London’s Ahlul Bayt Islamic Society, over which Abdulmutallab presided during his time as a student, continues to host extremists despite a statement by UCL’s president in January 2010 saying the university would perform an independent review of Abdulmutallab’s time at the university, and would assess conditions that would lead to the radicalization of students.
- As recently as February 2010, the Ahlul Bayt Islamic Society hosted an event titled “1979: The Revolution That Shook the World.”
- Invited speakers to the event included:
 - Mohammad Marandi, a professor of North American studies from Tehran University, who regularly serves as an English-language media spokesman to defend the actions of the Iranian regime.
 - Yvonne Ridley, a prominent personality in London’s political Islamist movement. She hosts a program on Press TV, Iran’s English-language 24-hour news network.



Poster for February 2010 UCL Islamic Society event

Visits to the United States

- Abdulmutallab visited the U.S. in 2004 and attended the Global Youth and Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C. The conference was organized by the Congressional Youth Leadership Council.
- In the summer of 2008, Abdulmutallab was granted a visa to travel from the U.K. to attend the “IlmSummit” conference in Houston, Texas. The conference lasted 11 days and was attended by approximately 100 Muslim students.
- The event was hosted by the Al Maghrib Institute. According to the description of the IlmSummit conference on the Al Maghrib forum web site, applications to attend the two-week long course of intensive study was open to all students in North America. It may be that Abdulmutallab was one of few who attended the conference from outside North America.
- According to the participant selection description found on the Al Maghrib forum: “Criterion that will decide who gets chosen are:
 - 1) Number of AlMaghrib seminars attended, with exam, and high pass
 - 2) Amount of Quran memorized
 - 3) Level of activism in the community”

Intelligence Coordination Failure?

- U.S authorities were aware of Abdulmutallab prior to the attack attempt on Christmas Day.
- On November 18, 2009, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab's father met with officers at the U.S. Embassy in Abuja, Nigeria to discuss his concern over his son's extremist views.
- At the time, Mr. Abdulmutallab's name was recorded in the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE) database in November. Approximately 550,000 names are registered in that database.
- A subset of the TIDE database is the Terrorist Screening Data Base (T.S.D.B.). Approximately 400,000 names are registered on the T.S.D.B. Fewer than 4,000 names from the T.S.D.B list are on the "No-Fly" list.
- According to intelligence officials, "there was insufficient derogatory information available" to warrant putting Abdulmutallab in the T.S.D.B., or on the no-fly or selectee lists, and as such, he was not on any watch list when he boarded the plane bound for Detroit.

Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Report

- On May 18, 2010, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence released its report on the attempted attack on Northwest Flight 253. The following is an excerpt from the report that summarizes the committee's findings:

The SSCI report identifies fourteen specific points of failure—a series of human errors, technical problems, systemic obstacles, analytical misjudgments, and competing priorities—which resulted in Abdulmutallab being able to travel to the United States on December 25, 2009. Those points of failure are:

1. The State Department Did Not Revoke Abdulmutallab's U.S. Visa.
2. Abdulmutallab Was Not Placed in the "Terrorist Screening Database" (TSDB), on the Selectee List, or on the No Fly List.
3. Reporting Was Not Distributed to All Appropriate CIA Elements.
4. A CIA Regional Division, at CIA Headquarters, Did Not Search Databases Containing Reports Related to Abdulmutallab.
5. CIA Did Not Disseminate Key Reporting Until after the 12/25 Attempted Attack.
6. A CIA Counterterrorism Center (CTC) Office's Limited Name Search Failed to Uncover the Key Reports on Abdulmutallab.
7. CIA CTC Analysts Failed to Connect the Reporting on Abdulmutallab.
8. FBI Counterterrorism Analysts Could Not Access All Relevant Reports.
9. NCTC's Directorate of Intelligence Failed to Connect the Reporting on Abdulmutallab.
10. NCTC's Watchlisting Office Did Not Conduct Additional Research to Find Additional Derogatory Information to Place Abdulmutallab on a Watchlist.
11. NSA Did Not Pursue Potential Collection Opportunities That Could Have Provided Information on Abdulmutallab.
12. Analysts Did Not Connect Key Reports Partly Identifying Abdulmutallab and Failed to Ensure Dissemination of All Relevant Reporting.
13. NSA Did Not Nominate Abdulmutallab for Watchlisting or the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE) Based on Information Partly Identifying Him.
14. Intelligence Analysts Were Primarily Focused on Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) Threats to U.S. Interests in Yemen, Rather than on Potential AQAP Threats to the U.S. Homeland.

Implications

- “The US has spent billions to protect its airlines but they couldn't prevent Umar Farouk [Abdulmutallab].” - Anwar al Awlaki in a statement issued on March 19, 2010.
- Awlaki’s mocking statement points to vulnerabilities in a highly sophisticated transportation security apparatus. Terrorist groups will continue to exploit vulnerabilities, and will utilize Western recruits who are familiar with transportation systems to gather intelligence. Najibullah Zazi trained in Pakistan and plotted to attack the subway system in New York, where he had lived. Bryan Neal Vinas, also a New Yorker, trained in Pakistan and supplied Al-Qaida with information about the Long Island Railroad system.
- Al-Qaida will continue to encourage the use of small explosive devices to attack airlines and other transportation systems.

Implications

- In some cases, individuals are exposed to radical ideology at university campuses.
- Most extra-curricular, special interest university student groups, such as Islamic societies, run independently of the university administrators. The president, and other leaders of student associations, often independently decide who their guest speakers will be and what ideological viewpoint will be emphasized.
- The prevalent ideological views emphasized in student organization meetings can change depending on the views held by students who serve in leadership positions. Once a student leader graduates, the overall agenda of the organization can change.
- Abdulmutallab was the fourth president of a London-based Islamic student society to face terrorism charges in the last three years. It does not appear that he had made fiery statements publicly; however, his viewpoints would likely have been reflected by the Islamic association's activities and the speakers brought to the campus.

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- Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula's statement concerning the use of small explosive devices to attack airlines and subways can be found at <http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/nefaAQIYTGTAirports1209.pdf>.