

House Committee on Homeland Security

27 January 2010

“Flight 253: Learning Lessons from an Averted Tragedy”



Statement for the Record

of

Michael E. Leiter

Director of the National Counterterrorism Center

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Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member King, and Members of the Committee on Homeland Security: Thank you for your invitation to appear before the committee to discuss the events leading up to the attempted terrorist attack on Christmas day and the improvements the National Counterterrorism Center and the Intelligence Community have underway to fix deficiencies.

It is my privilege to be accompanied by Jane Holl Lute, Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security and Patrick Kennedy, Undersecretary of State for Management.

The attempted terrorist attack on Christmas day did not succeed, but, as one of several recent attacks against the United States inspired by jihadist ideology or directed by al Qa’ida and its affiliates, it reminds us that our mission to protect Americans is unending.

Let’s start with this clear assertion: Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab should not have stepped on that plane. The counterterrorism system failed and we told the President we are determined to do better.

Within the Intelligence Community we had strategic intelligence that al Qa’ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) had the intention of taking action against the United States prior to the failed attack on December 25th, but, we did not direct more resources against AQAP, nor insist that the watchlisting criteria be adjusted prior to the event. In addition, the Intelligence Community analysts who were working hard on immediate threats to Americans in Yemen did not understand the fragments of intelligence on what turned out later to be Mr. Abdulmutallab, so they did not push him onto the terrorist watchlist.

We are taking a fresh and penetrating look at strengthening both human and technical performance and do what we have to do in all areas. Director of National Intelligence Blair and I have specifically been tasked by the President to improve and manage work in four areas:

Immediately reaffirm and clarify roles and responsibilities of the counterterrorism analytic components of the IC in synchronizing, correlating, and analyzing all sources of intelligence related to terrorism.

Accelerate information technology enhancements, to include knowledge discovery, database integration, cross-database searches, and the ability to correlate biographic information with terrorism-related intelligence.

Take further steps to enhance the rigor and raise the standard of tradecraft of intelligence analysis, especially analysis designed to uncover and prevent terrorist plots.

Ensure resources are properly aligned with issues highlighted in strategic warning analysis.

Additionally, NCTC has been tasked by the President to do the following:

Establish and resource appropriately a process to prioritize and to pursue thoroughly and exhaustively terrorism threat threads, to include the identification of appropriate follow-up action by the intelligence, law enforcement, and homeland security communities.

Establish a dedicated capability responsible for enhancing record information on possible terrorist in the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment for watchlisting purposes.

The Events Leading Up to the Christmas Day Attack

I will now briefly discuss some of the details of the bombing attempt and what we missed. As the President has said, this was not—like in 2001—a failure to collect or share intelligence; rather it was a failure to connect, integrate, and understand the intelligence we had.

Although NCTC and the Intelligence Community had long warned of the threat posed by al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, we did not correlate the specific information that would have been required to help keep Abdulmutallab off that Northwest Airlines flight.

More specifically, the Intelligence Community highlighted the growing threat to US and Western interests in the region posed by AQAP, whose precursor

elements attacked our embassy in Sana'a in 2008. Our analysis focused on AQAP's plans to strike US targets in Yemen, but it also noted—increasingly in the Fall of 2009—the possibility of targeting the United States. We had analyzed the information that this group was working with an individual who we now know was the individual involved in the Christmas attack.

In addition, the Intelligence Community warned repeatedly of the type of explosive device used by Abdulmutallab and the ways in which it might prove a challenge to screening. Of course, at the Amsterdam airport, Abdulmutallab was subjected to the same screening as other passengers—he passed through a metal detector, which didn't detect the explosives that were sewn into his clothes.

As I have noted, despite our successes in identifying the overall themes that described the plot we failed to make the final connections—the “last tactical mile”—linking Abdulmutallab's identity to the plot. We had the information that came from his father that he was concerned about his son going to Yemen, coming under the influence of unknown religious extremists, and that he was not going to return home. We also had other streams of information coming from intelligence channels that provided pieces of the story. We had a partial name, an indication of a Nigerian, but there was nothing that brought it all together—nor did we do so in our analysis.

As a result, although Mr. Abdulmutallab was identified as a known or suspected terrorist and entered into the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE)—and this information was in turn widely available throughout the Intelligence Community—the derogatory information associated with him did not meet the existing policy standards—those first adopted in the summer of 2008 and ultimately promulgated in February 2009—for him to be “watchlisted,” let alone placed on the No Fly List or Selectee lists.

Had all of the information the U.S. had available, fragmentary and otherwise, been linked together, his name would have undoubtedly been entered on the Terrorist Screening Database which is exported to the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security. Whether he would have been placed on either the No Fly or Selectee list—again based on the existing standards—would have been determined by the strength of the analytic judgment. One of the clear lessons the U.S. Government has learned and which the Intelligence Community will support is the need to modify the standards for inclusion on such lists.

In hindsight, the intelligence we had can be assessed with a high degree of confidence to describe Mr. Abdulmutallab as a likely operative of AQAP. But

without making excuses for what we did not do, I think it critical that we at least note the context in which this failure occurred: Each day NCTC receives literally thousands of pieces of intelligence information from around the world, reviews literally thousands of different names, and places more than 350 people a day on the watchlist—virtually all based on far more damning information than that associated with Mr. Abdulutallab prior to Christmas Day. Although we must and will do better, we must also recognize that not all of the pieces rise above the noise level.

The men and women of the National Counterterrorism Center and the Intelligence Community are committed to fighting terrorism at home and abroad and will seek every opportunity to better our analytical tradecraft, more aggressively pursue those that plan and perpetrate acts of terrorism, and effectively enhance the criteria used to keep known or suspected terrorists out of the United States.