

US Senate begins whitewash hearings on Northwest Flight 253 bomb plot

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The US Senate Homeland Security Committee on Wednesday held initial hearings with top Obama administration intelligence officials into the attempt of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a 23-year old alleged Al Qaeda member from Nigeria, to detonate explosives aboard Northwest Flight 253 from Amsterdam as it neared landing in Detroit on December 25.

Despite their declared intent of “getting to the bottom” of the massive security failure that very nearly cost 300 lives, the senators of the Homeland Security Committee did not challenge the intelligence heads—Dennis Blair, Director of National Intelligence (DNI), Michael E. Leiter, director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCC), and Janet Napolitano, Secretary of Homeland Security—regarding the official version of the event.

The entire hearing was based on the supposition that the US intelligence apparatus was honestly unable to “connect the dots” between various pieces of information at its disposal. This is particularly unbelievable, given that each piece of information was itself sufficient to alert the US government that Abdulmutallab posed a threat.

The intelligence chiefs acknowledged that they had learned in November through an intercept in Yemen that a man named Umar Farouk had volunteered to carry out an Al Qaeda mission. The information was revealed in a recent *New York Times* report, which also showed that the US intelligence had established a date—Christmas Day—when an attack was likely to happen. (See: “More ‘missed clues’ in the Northwest Flight 253 bomb plot”)

Leiter acknowledged that “we had a partial name, Umar Farouk, [but] didn’t put that together” with the fact that Farouk’s father had given his son’s full name to CIA and US embassy officials in Nigeria, together with a warning that his son might be involved in Islamist terrorism.

Nor did the spy agencies “put that together” with other

information that they have previously admitted having: that Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula intended to attack the United States, that it had recruited a Nigerian for that purpose, and that Abdulmutallab had recently gone from Nigeria to Yemen to join an extremist organization.

The Senators did not pursue this damning admission, accepting at face value, once again, the spy agencies’ supposed difficulty in “information management.” Nor did they ask why the Obama administration had not previously acknowledged that they had the alleged bomber’s name.

Leiter also acknowledged that, as a result of incriminating information, Abdulmutallab was considered a “known or suspected terrorist” and thus had been placed on the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE) list, but, inexplicably, not on a narrower list, the Terrorist Screening Database. Not being placed on that list, Abdulmutallab’s name was not forwarded to the Department of Homeland Security for increased airport screening (the “selectee list”) and to be placed on the “no-fly” list. Nor was the name sent to the State Department, which might have revoked his visa.

This stunning series of events has led to mounting behind-the-scenes tensions among the military, intelligence agencies and the State Department. The NCC and the State Department have traded barbs over who was responsible for not revoking Abdulmutallab’s visa. The Department of Homeland Security has implied that blame for the failure to put Abdulmutallab on the no-fly list rests with the non-domestic spy agencies. All of the aforementioned agencies have tacitly supported the Republican attack on the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for reading Abdulmutallab his Miranda rights and placing him in the domestic justice system.

In another bizarre lapse, the US State Department only declared Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), the organization that allegedly sent Abdulmutallab onto Flight 253, to be a terrorist group on Tuesday. This is despite the fact that AQAP has operated for over a year, and was held responsible for terrorist attacks on South Korean tourists in Yemen in March 2009, high-ranking Saudi Prince Muhammad bin Nayif in August, and Flight 253 last month. One might also expect that the name of the organization itself would raise suspicions among anti-terrorism officials.

The implication of this announcement, however, was that until January 19, 2010, US officials were not legally required to “implement an asset freeze, travel ban, and arms embargo” against AQAP. This only raises more questions as to what connections US agencies might have had with the attackers.

The senators avoided dealing with these issues in Wednesday’s hearings, devoting much of their time instead to demanding further restrictions on democratic rights.

Republicans criticized the Obama administration over Abdulmutallab being read his rights and given a civilian trial. Senator John McCain called the decision to try Abdulmutallab in civilian courts “a terrible, terrible mistake,” and said Americans are endangered as a result.

The ranking Republican on the committee, Susan Collins, and Republican Senator John Ensign strongly implied that Abdulmutallab should have been tortured. Collins asked, “how can we uncover plots” if suspects are allowed to “lawyer up and stop answering questions?” Ensign argued that the declared reversion of CIA interrogators to the methods laid out in the Army Field Manual allows terrorists to “train” in advance of interrogations.

None of the intelligence chiefs present defended the administration’s decision to proceed in civilian courts. Blair, Napolitano, and Leiter told the committee that they were not consulted over Abdulmutallab’s questioning. Blair went so far as to contradict the administration’s decision, saying he should have been interrogated by the new High-Value Detainee Interrogation Group, or HIG. “That unit was created exactly for this purpose,” Blair said. “We did not invoke the HIG in this case. We should have.”

Democrats were more effusive than Republicans in their praise of the intelligence agencies, and joined with Republicans in demanding that the intelligence apparatus be given more resources and greater powers.

In the course of his testimony, Blair twice asserted that the cause of the security failure was too much “pressure” from those concerned about democratic rights who had protested the no-fly list. Too many people felt “hassled” by screening processes at airports, he said, raising questions like “Why are you searching grandmothers?” Blair concluded, “I should not have given in to that pressure.” The no-fly list has been considerably expanded since December 25, Blair reassured the senators.

These comments were warmly praised by Senator Joseph Lieberman, the Democratic Independent who chairs the committee. Lieberman said that it was a mistake to treat alleged terrorists with a “legalistic” approach. “We’re at war with these people,” he declared.

The meeting might have been called *pro forma*, except that even forms were not well observed. Some senators did not bother to show up; others came late and left early. A promised “closed door” meeting with the intelligence chiefs after the meeting was suddenly scrapped, Lieberman citing time constraints.

The only serious question came from McCain, who demanded from Blair and Leiter to know if anyone had been held accountable for the evident security failures that allowed Abdulmutallab to board the flight. “Who has been held accountable?” McCain asked. “Has anybody been fired? Has anybody been transferred?” Blair and Leiter could not describe a single disciplinary action or consequence for what is purported to be, in the most innocent scenario, a massive security failure.



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