

Amid media blackout

Congressional hearing reveals US intelligence agencies shielded Flight 253 bomber

Alex Lantier
3 February 2010

A January 27 hearing of the House Committee on Homeland Security established that US intelligence agencies stopped the State Department from revoking the US visa of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab. The Nigerian student, whom US officials suspected of being affiliated with the Yemeni terrorist group Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, attempted to set off a bomb on Northwest Flight 253 into Detroit on Christmas Day. Revocation of Abdulmutallab's visa would have prevented him from boarding the airplane.

The hearing was reported in a brief article posted January 27 on the web site of the *Detroit News*, headlined, "Terror Suspect Kept Visa to Avoid Tipping Off Larger Investigation."

The revelation that US intelligence agencies made a deliberate decision to allow Abdulmutallab to board the commercial flight, without any special airport screening, has been buried in the media. As of this writing, nearly a week after the hearing, the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times* have published no articles on the subject. Nor have the broadcast or cable media reported on it.

This is despite—or perhaps more accurately, because of—the fact that this information exposes the official government story of the near-disaster to be a lie. President Obama, who has joined with top US intelligence, FBI and Homeland Security officials to insist that Abdulmutallab was inadvertently allowed to board the plane carrying explosives because of a failure to "connect the dots," has from the start been deceiving the American people.

The official line strained credulity from the outset, given reports of multiple advance warnings that the Nigerian student was linked to terrorists in Yemen who were planning attacks on the US.

As was widely reported within hours of the failed bombing attempt, Abdulmutallab's father—a former Nigerian government minister and prominent banker—went to the US embassy in Abuja in November to warn that his son was involved with radical Islamists in Yemen and had broken off contact with his family. The family said they had given US officials extensive information about their son in the expectation that they would "find and return him home."

In his prepared statement to the House Committee on Homeland Security on January 27, State Department Under-Secretary for Management Patrick Kennedy said: "In the case of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, on the day following his father's November 19 visit to the Embassy, we sent a cable to the Washington intelligence and law enforcement community through proper channels (the Visas Viper system) that 'Information at post suggests [Farouk] may be involved in Yemeni-based extremists.'"

Kennedy confirmed that all US intelligence agencies received warnings that Abdulmutallab was training with terrorists in Yemen. He noted that the initial diplomatic cable from Abuja misspelled Abdulmutallab's name.

However, Kennedy continued, "At the same time, the Consular Section entered Abdulmutallab into the Consular Lookout and Support System database known as CLASS... The CLASS entry resulted in a lookout using the correct spelling that was shared automatically with the primary lookout system used by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and accessible to other agencies."

Under questioning by the committee chairman, Rep. Bennie Thompson, Kennedy explained why the State Department might not revoke the US visa of a suspected terrorist: "We will revoke the visa of any individual who is a threat to the United States, but we do take one preliminary step. We ask our law enforcement and intelligence community partners, 'Do you have eyes on this person and do you want us to let this person proceed under your surveillance so that you may potentially break a larger plot?'"

He added: "And one of the members [of the intelligence community]—and we'd be glad to give you that out of [open session]—in private—said, 'Please, do not revoke this visa. We have eyes on this person. We are following this person who has the visa for the purpose of trying to roll up an entire network, not just stop one person.'"

Under questioning by Rep. Dan Lungren, Kennedy confirmed that Abdulmutallab's case was one in which US intelligence officials had interceded to block a visa revocation.

In prepared remarks at the same hearing, National Counterterrorism Center Director Michael Leiter stated: "Within the intelligence community we had strategic intelligence that Al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula [AQAP—the terrorist group in Yemen with which Abdulmutallab was in contact] 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 watch-listing criteria be adjusted prior to the event." He added that US intelligence analysts "did not push [Abdulmutallab] onto the terrorist watch-list."

This inaction came despite the fact that US intelligence agencies were well aware of the threat posed by AQAP. According to Leiter: "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 [the Yemeni capital] Sana'a [in September 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."

Amazingly, the US government did not declare AQAP a terrorist group until January 19, 2010, even though it was referred to by that name in 2009. State Department spokesman Philip Crowley stated that declaring AQAP a terrorist group would "prohibit provision of material support and arms to AQAP and also include immigration-related restrictions that will help stem the flow of finances to AQAP." Thus, for nearly a month after the attempted bombing, US officials were not required to implement a

range of measures against AQAP, including “an asset freeze, travel ban, and arms embargo,” according to Crowley.

At the January 27 hearing, Leiter said that there had been “multiple” points of failure in the US government’s response to warnings of the impending attack. However, all three government officials testifying—Kennedy, Leiter and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Deputy Secretary Jane Lute—said no disciplinary action would be taken.

DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano, who was invited to the hearing and was in Washington at the time, refused to attend. She did not notify committee members beforehand. Napolitano was widely criticized for claiming on December 27 that the “system worked” prior to, during and after the attempted bombing.

Official testimony now records that US intelligence agencies deliberately let Abdulmutallab board Flight 253, putting the lives of hundreds of passengers at risk, in the course of an as yet undisclosed intelligence operation. Whether US agencies were unaware of Abdulmutallab’s plans, or consciously decided to allow an attack to proceed, remains unclear.

In this context, it should be noted that the reason for US inaction given at the hearing—that US intelligence did not want to alert Al Qaeda that it was watching Abdulmutallab—does not hold water. As congressmen noted during the hearing, US Customs and Border Protection had prepared to interrogate Abdulmutallab upon arrival in Detroit, as he was on the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment database. This would be counterproductive if US agencies were mounting a concerted effort to hide their interest in Abdulmutallab.

There are a number of possible explanations for the decision to allow Abdulmutallab to board Northwest Flight 253. One possibility is that it was bound up with efforts by elements within the US intelligence apparatus to politically destabilize the Obama administration.

To seriously investigate the possible motivations behind the government’s actions, the question must be asked: What would have been the consequences of a successful attack? Hysterical media coverage would have provided fodder for the most right-wing factions in the ruling class to demand war against Yemen or other Muslim countries. At home, there would have been calls for a mass dragnet like that after the September 11 attacks, and immense political pressure for a new battery of police-state laws.

Even having failed, the attack was used as a pretext for expanding US military operations in Yemen, adding further security restrictions at airports, and expanding the “no-fly” passenger list and other databases by agencies unaccountable to the American people.

The testimony at the January 27 hearing also blows apart the line promulgated by the establishment media, which universally echoed the administration’s hackneyed phrase to explain the Flight 253 incident—a “failure to connect the dots” on the part of US intelligence agencies. This, of course, is the same phrase used in the official cover-up of the 9/11 attacks.

Thus, in a January 2 editorial entitled “Why Didn’t They See It?” the *New York Times* wrote: “No doubt sorting through heaps of information and determining what is urgent or even worthy of follow-up is daunting. Still, it is incredible, and frightening, that the government cannot do at least as good a job at swiftly updating and correlating information as Google.”

The *Times* itself, in a subsequent article published January 18, reported the results of its own investigation, based on interviews with senior White House and intelligence officials. The newspaper revealed more “missed clues,” including the fact that intelligence authorities learned in early November from a communications intercept of Al Qaeda followers in Yemen that a man named “Umar Farouk” had volunteered for a coming operation. Despite such evidence of an official cover-up, the *Times* maintained the line that the near-disaster was the result of mistakes,

omissions and an inability to “connect the dots.”

It is now possible to answer the *New York Times* editorial of January 2: They did “see it,” and the *Times*’ incredulous and cynical attempt to explain the Flight 253 attack as the result of mere incompetence was part of a campaign of disinformation. This is a campaign in which, by its silence on the January 27 hearing, the *Times* continues to participate.

The Congressional hearing vindicates the analysis of the *World Socialist Web Site*, which exposed the highly dubious character of the official story, pointed to the possibility of US government involvement, and demanded that officials involved in handling Abdulmutallab’s case be named and investigated.

In a December 31 column (“The Northwest Flight 253 intelligence failure: Negligence or conspiracy?”) the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: “The general outlines of the Northwest bombing attempt and the 9/11 attacks are startlingly similar. One might even say that what is involved is a *modus operandi*. In both cases, those alleged to have carried out the actions had been the subject of US intelligence investigations and surveillance and had been allowed to enter the country and board flights under conditions that would normally have set off multiple security alarms.

“Both then and now, the government and the media expect the public to accept that all that was involved was mistakes. But why should anyone assume that the failure to act on the extensive intelligence leading to Abdulmutallab involved merely ‘innocent’ mistakes—and not something far more sinister?”

In the January 18 *New York Times* article cited above, the newspaper also noted that Obama personally met on December 22 with CIA, FBI, and DHS officials because Obama was “worried about possible terrorist attacks over the Christmas holiday.” In another meeting the same day, the *Times* reported, Obama’s homeland security advisor John Brennan held talks on Yemen, “where a stream of disturbing intelligence had suggested that Qaeda operatives were preparing for some action, perhaps a strike on an American target on Christmas day.”

Nevertheless, Obama gave a December 28 internet and radio address in which he falsely described Abdulmutallab as an “isolated extremist.”

He also declared: “A full investigation has been launched into this attempted act of terrorism, and we will not rest until we find all who were involved and hold them accountable... We will continue to use every element of our national power to disrupt, to dismantle and defeat the violent extremists who threaten us.”

Over a month after Obama made these claims, it is clear that US intelligence agencies were deeply involved and the White House is overseeing a massive cover-up.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact