Unanswered questions in the Yemen terror scare

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In what has become a regular feature of American public life—especially on the eve of major elections—the airwaves were taken over Friday by breathless reports of a new terror threat. It is impossible to determine how much is fact and how much is fiction in the ever-expanding claims being made regarding two packages from Yemen allegedly containing high explosives and addressed to two synagogues in Chicago.

But the very fact that the decision was made, undoubtedly at a very high level, to give such massive media coverage to the alleged plot—before any concrete details were being reported and entirely on the basis of unsubstantiated claims made by, for the most part, anonymous officials—is sufficient reason to adopt a highly skeptical attitude.

The tag line of a popular American television series about a US counterterrorism group—"Not every conspiracy is a theory"—is apt. The hidden purposes behind the current government-media campaign remain unclear, but one thing is certain: no trust should be placed in any of the information being given out.

The suspicious packages, one shipped via UPS and intercepted at an airport in Britain and the other a FedEx package seized at an airport in Dubai, were immediately declared to be part of a major plot hatched by Yemen-based Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Late Friday afternoon, President Obama appeared at the White House to proclaim the terror scare a "credible threat." He was followed by his press spokesman Robert Gibbs and his chief terrorism adviser, John Brennan, who boasted of the government's swift response and promised undefined further actions to counter the alleged threat from Yemen and other countries.

Aside from the unsubstantiated character of the claims, a number of contradictions and anomalies remain unexplained. On Friday, MSNBC was deriding the bombs said to have been concealed within toner cartridges as crude and amateurish. CNN was reporting that no explosives of any kind were found in the packages. By Sunday, the US government and the media were describing the bombs as highly sophisticated—the work of professionals.

The *New York Times* ominously began its report on Sunday: "The powerful bombs concealed inside cargo packages and destined for the United States were expertly constructed and unusually sophisticated, American officials said Saturday, further evidence that Al Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen is steadily improving its abilities to strike on American soil."

The press is uniformly citing US officials who state that the bomb maker is Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri, who is named as the chief target of US reprisals, i.e., assassination. Yet in its account, the *Times* reports, without evidently sensing the contradiction, that this "expert" bomb maker built the "rudimentary" devices used by last year's unsuccessful Christmas Day bomber in Detroit and a Yemeni suicide bomber who tried and failed to assassinate the head of Saudi intelligence, Mohammed bin Nayef, earlier in 2009.

On Sunday, Brennan said he agreed with British Prime Minister David Cameron's claim that the package bombs were meant to explode in the air, not at the designated Chicago synagogues. No one, however, has explained why supposedly expert terrorists would flag their own bombs, designed to blow up airplanes, by sending them from Yemen to Jewish groups in the US!

Then there is the striking coincidence that the terror scare erupted just two days after the *Financial Times* carried a front-page article headlined "Chairman of BA Attacks US on Airport Security." The article cited British Airways Chairman Martin Broughton angrily denouncing US demands for "completely redundant" airport checks and urging the British authorities to stop "kowtowing" to the Americans.

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No doubt with Broughton's statements in mind, US officials are already suggesting that the current threat will be used to continue and even expand the security measures imposed by the US on foreign carriers.

It is impossible to know with any certainty whether there is any basis for the official claims, or, if there is a kernel of truth, where fact ends and exaggeration and lies begin. But as always in such cases, it is appropriate to ask, "Who benefits?"

Apart from US air carriers eager to place ever more onerous requirements on their foreign competitors, there are a number of parties that have much to gain from whipping up public fear in general and animus toward Yemen in particular.

It was the Saudis, in the person of intelligence chief Nayef, who reportedly tipped off Washington Thursday about the explosive packages from Yemen. The Saudi sheikdom considers Yemen, with a weak government and a Shia rebellion in its northern regions bordering Saudi Arabia, to be a mortal threat to the stability of its regime. As the *Times* reported: "The Saudis consider the Qaeda branch in Yemen its biggest security threat and Saudi intelligence has set up both a web of electronic surveillance and spies to penetrate the organization."

It would therefore be quite possible for Saudi spies to orchestrate the terror scare in order to push Washington to step up its covert operations in Yemen—a country of great strategic interest to the US because it straddles the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea and borders vital oil shipping routes.

As for the US, the sudden emergence of supposed terror threats has become a standard means of disorienting the American people and maintaining social control. In announcing this threat on the eve of an election, Obama is taking a page from the Bush playbook. The Bush White House used terror scares in an attempt to manipulate public opinion on the eve of the elections of 2002, 2004 and 2006.

This year, there is all the more need to distract public attention under conditions of a worsening economic crisis and growing frustration and anger against the entire political establishment. There are, moreover, specific domestic and foreign policy objectives that coincide with the creation of an atmosphere of fear and insecurity.

Abroad, there is the need to further escalate the killing in Iraq and Afghanistan, in the face of growing domestic opposition to the wars, and expand US military aggression to other countries. Under Obama, the US has already intensified its covert operations in Yemen, but it has been forced to halt its missile attacks on suspected insurgents since May, when one of its missiles killed a deputy provincial governor, prompting Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh to demand a halt to the strikes.

The US has been pressing the Yemeni regime to allow it to resume the strikes. As the *New York Times* noted Sunday, "American officials have been considering sending armed drone aircraft to Yemen to replicate the Pakistan campaign, but such a move would almost certainly require the approval of the mercurial Mr. Saleh."

At home, the terror scares are used to justify the further buildup of the police powers of the state and deeper attacks on democratic rights. One of the most sinister aspects of the current government and media campaign is the singling out, without any evidence, of an American citizen, Anwar al-Awlaki, as the supposed mastermind of the plot.

In its article on Sunday, the *Times* baldly reported that "American officials said evidence was mounting that the top leadership of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, including the radical American-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki, was behind the attempted attacks." The *Times* returned to this theme, citing American intelligence officials that the plot "may have been blessed by the highest levels of Al Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen, including Mr. Awlaki."

The newspaper noted that US officials "did not present hard evidence of Mr. Awlaki's involvement," and then went on to report, "This year, the CIA designated Mr. Awlaki—an American citizen—as a high priority for the agency's campaign of targeted killing."

Thus one of the uses to which the current terror scare is being put is to justify the assassination of an American citizen by his own government. The Obama administration is currently seeking to quash a case brought by the American Civil Liberties Union challenging its claim that the president has the legal power to order the murder of anyone, including an American citizen, whom he declares to be a terrorist.

For its part, the *Times*, the leading organ of the US liberal establishment, published an editorial October 10 supporting the White House position. (See: "The New York Times defends assassinations").

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