



Commentary

Is the Shark Moving? Analyzing the 2009 Christmas Day Terrorism Scare

The terrorist organization, like the shark, must move forward or die. Forward motion creates the essential appearance of achievement, attracts funding and new members, encourages hope and supports the narrative that victory is inevitable. If we are effective in our security and countermeasures, the organization must change tactics in response. Only then can it continue to mount successful attacks with any reliability.

How Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab was able to board a Northwest Airlines flight from Amsterdam to Detroit with the components of an incendiary device is a question to be answered; but this failed attempt also tells us much.

What happened Christmas Day on Northwest Flight 253 was a reprise of the December 2001 "shoe bomber" incident. The 2001 attempt, and the most recent, failed not because of effective screening, but a faulty device that resulted in only smoke and flame.

That this same tactic would be employed suggests a lack of options and certainly a lack of imagination. Firstly, the expectation for a successful breach of security should have been low. Amsterdam, though a concern due to the frequency of travel by persons on watch lists, employs state-of-the-art body scanning machines to detect metal and explosives hidden under clothing. Secondly, the ordnance has apparently not improved in nine years. One can only assume field tests indicated potential for failure.

Imagine you are the leader in Al Qaeda with "go" or "no go" authority. You're told the operation involves breaching security in one of the most technologically sophisticated airports in the world, on a flight that would likely have an air marshal aboard, and the explosive device to be used is similar to the one that failed to detonate in 2001.

This incident suggests poor planning and desperation more than imagination or resolve. It has been more than four years since the London bombings, five since Madrid and nearly 10 since 9/11. Bin Laden, if alive, has not been on the world stage in some time, and Western security services have enjoyed dozens of successful preventions, called "failures" in the camps of our adversary.

The appearance of another messianic leader or another spectacular attack could reinvigorate the movement, and the idea of Al Qaeda will continue to attract the weak of mind and the dispossessed. But inevitably Al Qaeda, its ideology and its influence will decline. This decline, when it happens, will be a decades-long process, and Al Qaeda will likely become barbarously violent in its death throes. Nevertheless, the decline may have begun.

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MIPT is a non-profit training and professional development center serving the line officer.

The views expressed in this commentary are that of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

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