

## The Terror Scare

Scott Atran  
The Huffington Post  
December 30, 2009

On Christmas Day 2009, 23-year-old Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, an angel-faced British-educated engineering student and son of a prominent Nigerian banker, attempted to blow up Northwest flight 253 out of Amsterdam as it was about to land in Detroit. Although Umar's father had warned the American embassy in Nigeria that his son was spouting dangerous ideas, and his name was placed on a list of people to watch for, the young man managed to board the plane with a pack of explosives and a detonating syringe strapped to his body. Yet, as with Richard Reid eight years before, who had tried to bring down American Airlines Flight 63 from Paris to Miami with a shoe bomb containing the same plastic explosive that Umar had packed in his underwear, execution of the plot was clumsy and amateurish, and it failed.

But across the political spectrum, people panicked about how unsafe from terrorism America and the world remained, despite the fact that there has not been a single successful attack against America since 9/11. President Obama proclaimed that the country "will not rest" until it tracked down everyone who might be involved and that "every element of our national power" would be brought against others who might dare to try.

Studies by former CIA case officer Marc Sageman and others indicate that jihadi wannabes are poor, rich and in-between young men in transitional stages of their lives -- students, immigrants, in search of jobs or wives -- who are especially prone to movements that promise a meaningful cause and comradeship. Occasionally they hook up with a fellow traveler who has some connection to someone who can get them a bit of training and motivation to pack a bag of explosives and press a plunger, but more often they fall short or are caught.

Consider the case with the five Virginia men, age 19 to 25, who were arrested in Pakistan in December 2009 at the home of an activist from Jaish-e-Mohammed, the group that had helped to kidnap and kill *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. According to Pakistani interrogators, the American buddies -- two of Pakistani ancestry, one of Egyptian, one of Yemeni and one of Eritrean -- had used Internet sites to try to contact militants in Pakistan before traveling there from the United States in late November. After making a "farewell video" with the message that Muslims must be defended, they went overseas without telling their families. The concerned families notified American authorities, who warned their Pakistani counterparts. Emails and maps found in the band's possession indicate that they planned to travel to the Chashma Nuclear Plant in northwest Pakistan and on to a Qaeda-linked Taliban training facility.

Umar Abdulmutallab's path to radicalization started out a bit lonelier, but the trajectory is pretty familiar. Like "The Tunisian," Serhane Fakhret, a key player in the 2004 Madrid train bombing, Umar was a gifted student from a well-off family, who felt constantly lonely and out of place in foreign schools. He went to an English boarding school in Togo, studied Arabic in Yemen, and attended mechanical engineering classes at the elite University College London, where he

became president of the student Islamic Society and said he found contentment and companionship. But he seems to have mainly sought friendship and solutions to personal conflicts through internet contacts. On Facebook, he frequently mused about loneliness and love, his sexual frustrations and his need to marry soon because "the hair of a woman can easily arouse a man." "My name is Umar but you can call me Farouk," he wrote on the Islamic Forum Web site: "May Allah reward you for reading and reward you more for helping."

The Islamic society brought him into the counterculture against "the war on terror": "I imagine how the great jihad will take place, how the muslims will win, insha Allah [God willing], and rule the whole world, and establish the greatest empire once again!!!" reads one post from 2005. But only after leaving London and returning to Yemen did he become truly radicalized away from merely belonging to a counterculture that includes millions of young Muslims, and into a universe of violent extremism that draws forth few. In Yemen, he hooked up with the so-called Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and its American-born Imam, Anwar al-Awlaki, who apparently blessed Umar's martyrdom mission. Awlaki, a former preacher at a Northern Virginia mosque, gained international notoriety for his spiritual mentoring through Facebook of Maj. Nadal Hasan, an American-born Muslim psychiatrist who killed 13 fellow soldiers at Fort Hood in November.

Like The Tunisian and others who plotted attacks -- 9/11, Madrid, London -- Umar cut ties with his former companions who he felt were too timid to act, and cemented bonds with those who would be willing to strike. Like these others, Umar entered a seemingly privileged and parallel universe framed by the Takfiri vision of how the Prophet and his companions withdrew from Mecca to Medina to gain the spiritual and physical force to conquer the world.

The path to radicalization tells us that it is not by arraying "every element of US power" against would-be jahdis and those who inspire them that violent extremism will be stopped, as President Obama proclaimed. It is by paying attention to what makes these young men want to die to kill, through listening to their families and friends, and by trying to bind with them on the internet. "On the internet, no one knows I'm really a dog," said the cunning canine in a 1993 *New Yorker* cartoon. And what goes for dogs can certainly work for police. Good investigative reporting and police intelligence, like that at the NYPD, does this sort of tracking and outreach well. Even if every airline passenger were to be scanned naked or patted down, it would not stop young men from joining the Jihad or concocting new ways of killing civilians. Even if our airline and border security procedures were less reactive and hidebound by rules that, unlike Israeli security measures, lack common sense because they must be applied equally to everyone, everywhere, anytime rather than by degrees depending upon the individual, the time, and the place.

In fact, the physical threat to our population is extremely low, if fairly constant, and by no means poses any serious threat to our nation's existence or infrastructure. But each near success breeds a monstrously outsized reaction, given the actual damage that could be done to society. (There was a report written back in the early days of automobile touring, on the "jerk effect": when you hit an unexpected pot hole, your emotions rapidly ratchet up and you jump at the expectation of potholes at every turn for some time after.) A good risk analyst, like Carnegie Mellon's Baruch Fischhoff, would say that we exaggerate the numerator of risk, by extending it to near-misses

(knowing someone who knew someone who has flown on a similar route), and we underestimate the denominator (the total number of flights).

Terrorists are directly responsible for violent acts, but only indirectly for the reaction that follows. To terrorize and destabilize, terrorists need publicity and our complicity. With publicity, even failed terrorist acts succeed in terrorizing; without publicity, terrorism would fade away. The irony is that press and publicity are also the oxygen of an open society. But this does not require that our leaders equate what is most scary and spectacular with what is really most threatening and politically important. By amplifying and connecting relatively sporadic terrorist acts into a generalized "war," the somewhat marginal phenomenon of terrorism has become a primary preoccupation of our government and people. This transformation puts the lie to the constant refrain by our same leaders that "terrorists will gain nothing."

Terrorism remains at the top of the behavioral agendas of our political parties. This means that no matter what the outcome of our democratic elections, terrorists will continue to hold sway over our society in ways only the most audacious and outrageous among them ever imagined, at least in their thinking about the short term product of their actions. In this sense, Bin Laden has been victorious beyond his wildest dreams -- not because of anything he's done, but because of how we have reacted to the episodic near-misses and rare successes he inspires.