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The Underwear Bomber: A Malaysia Connection?

Clint Lorimore

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There have been recent reports that ten men recently arrested in Malaysia on charges of terrorism may have a connection to the Nigerian national who attempted to detonate a bomb during a flight to the US on 25 December 2009. Is there a terrorism nexus between Al Qaeda, Yemen and Malaysia?

The Underwear Bomber & the Malaysia Ten

RECENT REPORTS indicate that the ten terrorism suspects arrested last week in Malaysia were associated with Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Nigerian national who attempted to detonate a bomb sewn into his underwear during a flight from Amsterdam to Detroit on Christmas day 2009. While these reports of a connection remain unconfirmed, all sources reviewed confirm that the above mentioned individuals do have connections to international terrorist organisations. In the case of Abdulmutallab, he is connected to Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Speculation of a connection between Abdulmutallab and the ten terrorism suspects seems to stem from the nationalities of those arrested with two of the men arrested being from Nigeria, four from Syria and one each from Jordan and Yemen. Whether or not there is a connection between the Malaysia ten and Abdulmutallab remains to be seen, but what we do know at this point concerning the Christmas underwear bomber is illustrative.

Connecting the Dots, After the Fact

Abdulmutallab, the 23-year-old the son of a prominent Nigerian businessman, was enrolled as a mechanical engineering student at the prestigious University College London. Upon completion of his degree in 2008, he told his family he wanted to continue his education by studying Arabic in the Middle East. His parents agreed and they helped him enroll in a post-graduate degree programme studying business in Dubai. However, Abdulmutallab eventually dropped out from the programme and moved from Dubai to Yemen. With the move to Yemen came a change in Abdulmutallab. October

2009 was the last time that he had any contact with his parents, telling them that he no longer had any ties to him. It was at this time that Abdulmutallab's father went to the US Embassy in Nigeria to warn officials that his son might be involved with jihadists -- a warning which went unheeded.

Internally the US government through its National Security Agency had picked up intelligence that Al Qaeda in Yemen was planning to use an unnamed Nigerian for a terror attack on the US. Even more disturbing than this is the link with Anwar al-Awlaki, a radical imam based in Yemen who once had contacts with two of the 9/11 hijackers. He is also the same imam who had been exchanging e-mails with the US Army psychiatrist who killed 13 people in Texas at Fort Hood, and is now understood to also have been in communication with Abdulmutallab by phone.

A Recurring Nexus: al-Qaeda, Yemen & Malaysia?

There seems to be an unfortunate recurring terrorism-nexus between al-Qaeda, Yemen and Malaysia. A case in point was a meeting which took place in Kuala Lumpur on January 5-8, 2000 where Al Qaeda leadership came together to plan the attack against the USS Cole in Yemen and the subsequent 9/11 attacks. Malaysia is also the birthplace of the Al Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah, which was founded in January 1993 by Abu Bakar Bashir and Abdullah Sungkar while they were hiding in Malaysia from Indonesian authorities. While both men were Indonesian-born, they are also both of Yemeni descent. After the fall of Suharto they returned to Indonesia, following which came a wave of terrorist attacks, including the Bali Bombings that led to more than 200 people dead. Thankfully since that time Malaysia seems to be working to stop this trend of having itself connected to such atrocities, as demonstrated in the arrest and detention of the ten terror suspects.

Yemen has been a terrorism problem spot even before 9/11 with the Al Qaeda terrorist attack on the USS Cole. Since that time things have not gotten better, with returning jihadi fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan coming together to form AQAP in Yemen, a country which maintains little effective control outside of the capital. Furthermore this is all taking place in the poorest country in the Arab world which maintains large populated areas with no electricity or running water. The combined effect is to make Yemen an ideal environment for extremism to take root.

Therefore security measures alone will not suffice in addressing the underlying root causes of radicalisation in Yemen. Some of these root causes include persistent demographic and socioeconomic factors which lend to rampant inequality and subsequent radicalisation. This being said, it should not then be inferred that the Malaysian or Yemeni governments are willing partners in the use of their countries as staging grounds for terrorism. Rather this is a poignant reminder that terrorism is not confined to any one place and that terrorist organisations are working to exploit weaknesses wherever they can be found.

Policy Recommendations

Given these developments, a few policy steps can be considered:

Firstly, there needs to be a revamping of information-sharing, both internally to the US and among its allied partners, particularly in the area of cooperation regarding airline travel. This may be an opportunity to implement worldwide standards beyond just groupings of countries. It should be mentioned that it was information sharing which enabled the Malaysian authorities to act and capture the Malaysia ten.

Secondly, there should be continued effort to work with the Yemeni government; new international partners should also be roped in to aid in rooting out extremism in Yemen both on the economic and security fronts. The economic side of this equation is important in that Yemen is running out of oil, which means that there will be even fewer opportunities for Yemeni citizens to garner employment. A

new system of job creation will limit the number of foot-soldiers available for recruitment into extremist organisations like AQAP, not to mention its support base. This is an opportunity for international partners to join together in tackling radicalisation at its roots.

Clint Lorimore is a Ph.D. candidate and an Associate Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University where he is attached to its constituent unit, the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS).