

## terror-hewitt

### Intelligence or detection? The Yemen challenge

**Dr Steve Hewitt**  
Senior Lecturer, American and Canadian Studies

"The current battle between the counter-terrorists and al-Qaeda linked or inspired terrorists is similar to a chess match. Each terrorist move is met by a response. The response is then examined and the next move is made by those planning attacks.

The terrorists cleverly exploited gaps in airport security to carry out 9/11. Airport security was tightened. But gaps remained. The shoe bomber Richard Reid was the next test. Now shoes had to be scanned at airports. Then it was the liquid gel plot and not more than 100 millilitres of liquid can be carried on an airplane. Last December it was the underwear bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, and full body scanners are in place. The latest move is the cargo bombs after recognition by the terrorists that cargo does not receive the same scrutiny as passengers and their luggage do and that some passenger planes also carry cargo. So what are the lessons from this latest incident?

First, al-Qaeda-inspired and linked groups remain a continuing threat. Even in this case of failed terrorism, the potential impact on commerce is significant. There is clearly a determination to carry out attacks and to target aircraft as opposed to other less well-protected methods of transportation. The plane focus represents a form of one upmanship with those doing the terrorism countering. The particular terrorist efforts emanating out of Yemen have shown a worrying level of innovation. There appears to be obvious connections between the cargo bombs and the underwear bomber but also with an attack last August on the head of Saudi Arabian counter-terrorism in a version of the underwear bomb. The symbolism of the latest failed attack is also obvious. There was the targeting of several airplanes in a coordinated attack designed to generate maximum attention. The addressing of the packages to Jewish groups in Chicago checks two enemies of al-Qaeda and its ilk: Israel and the United States which has a resident of Chicago as its current president.

There are obvious counter-terrorism lessons as well. The fact that the bombs were carried on airplanes means that this episode can hardly be hailed as a counter-terrorism triumph. This example demonstrates that the flow of intelligence, particularly human intelligence, remains crucial for any level of disruption. Although the British media was quick to claim that the plot had been discovered by either MI6 or GCHQ (depending on which paper you read), the intelligence tip-off came from Saudi Arabia. This speaks to the reliance that both the UK and the United States have on countries that have roots in the areas where the plots are being hatched or supported. It is intelligence from such places, often generated through human sources as opposed to technology, which is needed to foil plots. It also creates a Catch-22 for the American and British governments in that the governments of those countries they are most dependent on for counter-terrorism intelligence frequently have abysmal human rights records.

Finally, there is what these attacks say about the threat of terrorism in general. First, despite the originality of the attack, technically they failed as they did with the underwear bomber. Repeated failures can't be counted on, however, hence the need for ensuring a continuing flow of intelligence. But there's also what these attacks say about the terrorists. 9/11 was truly a one off and the surprise and gaps in security that would allow an attack on such a scale no longer exist. Instead, the terrorists now pursue terrorism that is achievable: small scale efforts that even if they fail will generate attention. But there's a paradox here as well: for the attack that can most easily succeed is that which has the least likelihood of truly achieving strategic success. In other words, there is an element of stalemate although the moves and counter-moves continue."