

ISSUE BRIEF

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51st Terrorist Plot Against the United States: Continued Threat of al-Qaeda and Affiliates

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Earlier today, the White House and FBI confirmed reports of a terrorist attempt to blow up a U.S.-bound airliner, reminiscent of the planned attack that was foiled on Christmas Day 2009. The plot, perpetrated by al-Qaeda affiliate al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), appears to have been planned to coincide with the first anniversary of the death of Osama bin Laden. This most recent plot represents at least the 51st publicly known thwarted terrorist attack against the United States since 9/11 and should serve as a reminder of the continued threat of al-Qaeda and its affiliates.

Underwear Bomb Plot Grows More Sophisticated. While details of the plot are still emerging, reports indicate that the Yemen-based AQAP sought to place a suicide bomber on a U.S.-bound airplane

with a more sophisticated version of a bomb like that used by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab in his 2009 attempt to blow up Northwest Flight 253 over Detroit. The bomb, seized by U.S. intelligence, appears to have a more refined detonation system and did not contain metal, so it could potentially have passed through airport metal detectors. Officials, however, indicate that it is unclear whether the weapon would have been detected by full-body scanners.

The FBI is currently in possession of the weapon and is conducting technical and forensic analysis to learn whether it could have passed through airport security or could have brought down an airplane. It is not clear who built the bomb, but it is suspected to be the work of known AQAP bomb maker Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri.

U.S. intelligence and the Administration appear to have been aware of the plot at least since April. The American public, however, was never in danger, and the bomber, yet unnamed, is said to have neither picked a target nor bought a plane ticket when the CIA stepped in to halt the plot.

Getting Counterterrorism and Intelligence Right. While the Administration seems to have come

under fire for recent statements that there was no known credible terrorist threat on the eve of the anniversary of Bin Laden's death—despite knowledge of the AQAP bomb plot—it should be applauded for holding the intelligence until it could be acted on and the threat to the public thwarted. Recognizing the public's right to know, there are times when the government must choose to be less forthcoming to best protect the nation. Likewise, the CIA's seizure of the explosive should be recognized in allowing the FBI to analyze the bomb and learn more about the terrorist threat and capabilities.

Nevertheless, while U.S. intelligence and counterterrorism agencies should continue to work to thwart terrorist plots long before the public is in danger, this alone is not enough. Congress and the Administration should:

- **Continue to ensure that the primary goal of U.S. counterterrorism strategy is to prevent any successful terrorist action.** Particularly now that al-Qaeda has become increasingly decentralized and turns with greater frequency to its affiliates, the U.S. should continue to seek to divide and defeat the terrorist

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network, working not only to prevent any one group from successfully penetrating our defenses, but also to craft specific strategies to deal with significant terrorist threats aimed at the U.S. The Administration and the nation as a whole should also continue to keep in place a robust, enduring, and sustainable enterprise to identify and combat transnational terrorist threats.

■ **Expand the Administration's actions against terrorist leadership beyond drone strikes.**

Clearly, drone strikes should be continued where appropriate, but "standoff" actions are not always the answer. There are times when sending in operators on the ground is the right thing to do. Only in this way will operators gather the hard intelligence (from papers, computers, and prisoners) that is needed to stay ahead of the terrorists.

■ **Maintain essential counter-terrorism tools.** Support for important investigative tools such as the PATRIOT Act is essential to maintaining the security of the U.S. and combating terrorist threats. Key provisions within the act, such as its roving surveillance authority and business records provisions, have proven essential in thwarting terrorist plots, but they require reauthorization every year. To ensure that law enforcement and intelligence authorities have the essential counterterrorism tools they need, Congress should seek permanent authorization of the three sunset provisions within the act.

Fighting a Continuing Threat.

At least 51 publicly known terrorist plots against the United States have been thwarted since 9/11. While al-Qaeda's terrorist networks have become increasingly dismantled and their leadership decimated,

the terrorist network and its affiliates continue to seek to harm the United States. Protecting the nation requires not only robust international and domestic intelligence and counterterrorism to stop attempted terrorist plots early, but also a continued commitment to combating global terrorism and insurgency.

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