

CARGO PLANE BOMBS

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David Rubens Associates is a specialist corporate security consultancy offering strategic security services to individuals and organisations across the world.

DRA has worked with government agencies, NGO's, international conglomerates and major global events, and brings a mixture of strategic vision, operational experience and academic research to all of its projects, however large or small.

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The news that two explosive devices originating in Yemen were recently found on cargo planes will have come as no surprise to security experts familiar with current national security issues, or even to those who have an interest in terrorism and public policy and who know little more than what they read in their daily newspapers.

The emergence of Yemen as a stand-alone centre of Al Qaeda activities has been widely reported, and the fact that the resources available to Yemeni groups include not only a highly educated and articulate western-educated leadership (often with high-level support from Saudi Arabia, America's closest ally in the Arab world), but also a strong cohort of radicalised westerners, fully capable of returning to their homelands carrying both the jihadi fervour and the technical capability necessary to deliver what might be low-level but nevertheless high impact attacks, suggests that these explosives will not be the last such attempts to regain the initiative in the on-going battle between jihadi groups and western security and intelligence agencies.

However, there have been a number of issues highlighted by the most recent incidents that suggests that western governments (and in particular the US and UK) have learned lessons from previous such incidents, and have developed (or at least, are in the process of developing) a new approach to the continued threat of international terrorism, one that is more in keeping with both the changed political rhetoric and the financial constraints which inform the reality ten years after 9/11.

Alarmists vs Pragmatists

On a doctrinal level, the War on Terror (a phrase which has been officially de-recognised in both Washington and London), has always been one fought between the Alarmists and the Pragmatists. The Alarmists have built their world view on the fact that the threat posed by international Islamic terrorism is of a scale and nature unique in modern human history, and that therefore there is a requirement to by-pass the traditional western democratic tools of 'rule by consensus', which are seen as preventing the authorities from being able to respond to the terrorist threat in an effective and meaningful way. This, coupled with the already unilateralist platform put forward by Bush's senior advisors (principally Cheney and Rumsfeld, but with a well-developed network of political and academic supporters united through their vision for the 'New American Century Project'), led to the situation where the battle to preserve western democratic values was itself built on the need to bury exactly those self-same values in the name of democratic freedom.

The Pragmatists, on the other hand, understand that rather than being a world-wide network of some SMERSH-like super-villains, Al Qaeda (and its subsidiary groups that have emerged into the light, often in an attempt to gain media coverage and international sponsorship rather than

from any particularly deep-rooted jihadi belief), is an amorphous group that has changed and adapted according to the wider political and security environment within which it is operating, and which depends, to an extent that is often over-looked by even the most informed observer, almost entirely on the ill-judged actions of the US and UK governments to act as its chief recruitment agency.

It was no surprise when senior Pakistani officials responded to claims by various UK leaders, including Gordon Brown (at that time PM), David Miliband (then Foreign secretary) and David Cameron (current PM) that Pakistan should do more to rein in terrorism on their territory, by pointing out that it was UK-born Muslims who were creating the problem in the UK, and it was UK-based preachers who were often most responsible for radicalising the next generation of suicide bombers.

According to the Pragmatists, rather than accepting AQ as a world-threatening monolithic organisation, it would be more accurate to see it as little more than an organisation in name only, with its ground-level activists mainly consisting of self-radicalizing and self-taught 'clean skins' who had little if any connection with international terrorism, and who are therefore able to operate 'under the radar', without coming to the attention of the various national and international security and intelligence agencies.

The Pragmatists see the War on Terror (by whichever name it is fought), as being much like the War on Drugs or the War on Crime, in that it is by its nature unwinnable, and is therefore never-ending. The reality of the War on Terror is that current security capability is such that any plot that involves a high level of coordination, with the associated logistical management issues of communications, money transfer, meetings and all of the other mundane issues involved in getting a plan from drawing board to delivery, means that it is almost impossible for such activity to take place without coming to the attention of the authorities at a relatively early stage in proceedings. It is in fact a characteristic of recent security statements concerning suspected terrorist plots that the announcement of their discovery includes the revelation that the plotters had in fact been under surveillance for some time, and that there was little, if any chance of them being able to deliver a successful attack.

The truth, according to the Pragmatists, is that since 9/11 there have only been two successful attacks in Europe – the train bombings of Madrid and London, and compared with the fatalities caused by tobacco-and alcohol-related deaths or deaths caused by motoring offences, these should be considered as part of the 'normal' price of living in the modern world. It is a sign of the changing language of counter terrorism that President Obama was able to publicly state that the US was able to 'absorb a terrorist attack' – which shows that he is in tune with the realities of CT management, though not necessarily with what might be considered acceptable within the framework of US political debate.

Changing Parameters: 2009 vs 2010

The outstanding characteristic of the reaction to the latest scare is the muted nature of the response. Whereas the Abdulmutallab incident (otherwise known as the Underpants Bomber, on the Delta Airline flight on Christmas Day 2009) was a call for a massive injection of new funding and technology (full-body screeners), the reaction to this attack has been to call for a debate as to how more effective security cover can be delivered to what has until now been a largely-ignored aspect of international commerce, the thousands of cargo flights that are made every day into all of the major airports of the world. Although this is undoubtedly as much to do with the realities of cutbacks and budget cuts, it is also a reflection of the realisation that there is no 'silver bullet' that will guarantee safety and disarm all potential terrorist attacks in one easy solution. (For a detailed analysis of the security issues raised by the Abdulmutallab incident, please contact DRA for our Abdulmutallab report).

Although it has been claimed that the bomb-maker Ibrahim Al-Asiri was the same person behind both the latest bombs and the Abdulmutallab device, the obvious truth is that they didn't explode, and that no damage was done. It is clear that it is not as easy as one would think to deliver a viable explosive device onto a plane – if it was, the likelihood is that it would have happened a lot more than has been the case. It is also true that even had they exploded, and a tragedy had been triggered, it would have been a tragedy of a single incident, not a threat to the continued existence of the modern world order.

An oft-repeated truism that has been heard from too many 'authorities' over the last few days is that the purpose of terrorism is to create terror. I have been saying for ten years that that is not the case, and that in fact the purpose of terrorism is to create a disproportionate reaction in the target government, which in itself will then lead to a cycle of oppressive reaction, alienation, polarisation and eventually self-fulfilling radicalisation.

From the terrorists' point of view, the best thing that happen would be for the US to exert political pressure on the Yemen government to 'crack down' on AQ affiliates within the country, leading almost inevitably to an indiscriminate targeting of government opponents, and acting as a catalyst for increased radicalisation across the region. What should happen, at least in the immediate term, is for this incident to be treated as another act of criminal intent, for the perpetrators to be identified and arrested, and for the due process of justice to take its course.



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