



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on January 11, 2010

Al-Qaeda Uses Popular Radical Clerics to Recruit Trainees

Yemeni intelligence officials asserted Friday that their investigation revealed that Umar Abdulmutallab, the Nigerian accused of attempted to bomb Northwest Flight 253 on Christmas Day in Detroit, met in Yemen with known al-Qaeda operatives, probably including American-born cleric Anwar al-Awlaki.



The source of the report, Rashad al-Alimi, is the Nigerian Deputy Prime Minister for national security and defense. The investigation described by al-Alimi further indicates, however, that Yemen was not where Abdulmutallab obtained the explosive device intended to bring down the airliner. According to the document, the bomb and the syringe that was designed to deliver the accelerant that would detonate the explosive powder were both obtained by Abdulmutallab in Lagos where he changed planes and headed for Amsterdam, then onto a Detroit-bound connection.

This account of events leading up to Abdulmutallab's thwarted terrorist attack differed from the official version offered by the governments of Nigeria, Holland, and the United Kingdom. Specifically, the Yemeni report cited by al-Alimi disagrees with previous findings regarding where Abdulmutallab was recruited, where he obtained the bomb, and how long he spent in a Lagos airport.

All other official narratives claim that Abdulmutallab flew from Ghana on December 24 and had a layover in Lagos while waiting to board the flight that would take him to Amsterdam and then on to Detroit the next day. Anonymous American officials have claimed that Abdulmutallab informed F.B.I. interrogators that he obtained the bomb from terrorists in Yemen. The Yemeni report disagrees and claims that the bomb was given to Abdulmutallab while he was in Lagos, Nigeria. Upon being asked to provide evidence for this new assertion, al-Alimi demurred.

As for the site of Abdulmutallab's recruitment by al-Qaeda, al-Alimi points the finger at England, specifically the University College of London where the young Nigerian Muslim served as president of a Muslim student association. "From 2005 on, he [Abdulmutallab] was absorbed by extremists in Britain, that is the reason he was not able to come back to Britain. Yemen was not informed by the U.S. or British authorities that there were concerns about him," al-Alimi told reporters at a press conference last Thursday.

Scotland Yard refused to comment as to their position on the role English-based extremists played in the recruitment of Abdulmutallab to the cause of jihad. Officially, the government of the U.K. admits



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that Abdulmutallab met with known “extremists” while in London, but denies that any of his activities there rose to the level of a credible terrorist threat.

There is dispute, also, as to how much time Abdulmutallab spent in the airport in Nigeria before boarding the plane bound for Amsterdam. Nigerian officials assert adamantly that the would-be bomber lingered in the airport for under half an hour after passing through all the necessary security checks, while other accounts put the duration of the stay at about four hours. This discrepancy is crucial to the case, as it is unlikely that Abdulmutallab would have been able to obtain the explosive device in 30 minutes, much less hide it in his underwear.

Abdulmutallab’s devotion to radical Islam was midwifed, according to al-Alimi, by Anwar al-Awlaki, the American-born, Yemeni-based imam known to have participated significantly in the radicalization of Major Nidal Hasan, the Army psychiatrist accused of murdering 13 people at Ft. Hood, Texas on November 5 of last year. According to various published reports, Abdulmutallab met with several known al-Qaeda leaders in a home in Shabwa, Yemen, including, so the reports say, al-Awlaki. “There is no doubt he met with al-Qaeda elements in Shabwa, including likely with Awlaki,” al-Alimi told reporters.

American intelligence officials are investigating the possible role al-Awlaki played in planning or promoting the botched Christmas Day bombing, but to date have made no official comment on the subject.

It is known, however, that on December 24 the Yemeni military bombed targets suspected to be al-Qaeda gathering spots, including one frequented by al-Awlaki. Yemeni military officials reported that 30 people were killed in the pre-dawn raids, but it was unclear whether al-Awlaki was among them. Al-Awlaki’s family in Yemen, however, reported that the radical cleric was not among the victims and that he was yet alive.

No one as yet has presented any reliable proof that al-Awlaki met with Abdulmutallab or that he is associated with the al-Qaeda branch that has claimed responsibility for the Christmas Day attempted bombing. This dearth of intelligence has not stopped the government in Yemen from describing the American expatriate as “the most dangerous man in Yemen.” Given that nation’s record of accommodating terrorists of all sorts (including pirates operating in the Gulf of Aden), that is quite a remarkable distinction.

There are those coming to al-Awlaki’s defense, however. People brave enough to identify themselves as friends of the Internet-savvy evangelist deny that he is a member of al-Qaeda (or any other terrorist organization), and refute the generally held perception that he is a radical muckraker that condones and encourages violence. It is known that al-Awlaki described the Ft. Hood shooter as a “hero” and called upon other Muslims in the American military to “follow in his footsteps.” Not exactly the behavior of a peace-loving holy man.

Al-Awlaki is among a growing quorum of Islamic preachers using the medium of the Internet to virally disseminate their pernicious, though increasingly popular, brand of Islam. From the United Kingdom to the United States, these English-speaking cyber-vangelists manipulate technology for the benefit of their zealous campaign to normalize what is ostensibly a marginal interpretation of the teachings of Mohammed and shepherd the disaffected, the doubting, and the devout toward a steadfast devotion to the holy war against the infidels of the West.



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Jarret Brachman is a former analyst for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and is the author of *Global Jihadism: Theory and Practice*, a book that analyzes the ideology that inspires and motivates al-Qaeda and affiliated terror organizations. In his research, Brachman discovered that the method to this Muslim madness is to “take very complex ideological thoughts and make them simple, with clear guidelines how to follow Islamic law.” The message is marketed in a package that attracts both the curious and the converted. “People across the spectrum of radicalism can gravitate to them [Internet-based imams] if they are just dipping their toe in or if they’re hard core,” Brachman said.

Experts in forensic technology have uncovered postings made by Abdulmutallab to a message board maintained by Abdullah el-Faisal, a Jamaican-born Muslim with a bent similar to that of al-Awlaki. According to the investigators, Abdulmutallab posted praise for the cleric who was expelled from England in 2007 after being convicted for soliciting murder and “inciting racial hatred.” Subsequently, el-Faisal was accused of being influential in encouraging the bombing of the London public transport system on July 7, 2005.

The threat posed by these web-based missionaries of violence, say the experts, is not only their success in attracting and converting young radicals to the cause of jihad, but principally in the access they provide to these young acolytes to the leadership, training, and intelligence possessed by their larger, more sinister sponsors, such as al-Qaeda.

“Awlaki is a talent spotter,” a counterterrorism analyst told [the New York Times](#). “That’s part of his value to al-Qaeda. If people are drawn to him, he can pass them along to trainers and operational planners. Abdulmutallab was canon fodder. A piece snapped into an operation,” he continued.

Experts and intelligence agencies worry that the greatest and most potent danger from these supposed stringers for the global jihadist cabal is not the top-down reach and appeal exercised by these radical recruiters, rather it is the bottom-up aspect of their relationship with those seeking their guidance. Major Hasan, for instance, sent 10 times as many e-mails to al-Awlaki than vice versa. The fear is that these are not borderline Muslim men teetering on the border between war and peace, rather they are recently self-radicalized militants scouring the Internet for accepted scholars of the movement that will validate their already nefarious and potentially deadly commitment to the glory of martyrdom for the cause. These penny-ante prophets are simple self-aggrandizing attention seekers that are demonstrably and reliably overeager to initiate new disciples, increase the sphere of their influence, and thus augment their reputation among the active terrorist community from whom they in turn crave validation and respect.

Photo of Rashad al-Alimi, the Nigerian Deputy Prime Minister: AP Images



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