



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on February 4, 2010

Fishy Facts About Flight 253

There is a long slate of oddities still inexplicable over a month after the timely thwarting of a potentially catastrophic terrorist attack over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009.

While there are always undotted “I”s and uncrossed “T”s in the record of the preparations for and execution of attempts to terrorize an unsuspecting population, the case of Nigerian Umar Abdulmutallab’s journey from student of history in London to student of terror in Yemen is particularly perplexing and replete with head-shaking questions. What follows is a brief exposition of some of the details of the plot and the players that are still shrouded in mystery.



Again, as is typical in the aftermath of this sort of occurrence, there is a maelstrom of stories swirling around Umar Abdulmutallab’s attempt to bomb Northwest Airlines Flight 253 bound from Amsterdam to Detroit on Christmas Day. Curiously, though, two of these stories are being roundly ignored by most media outlets, despite the intriguing facts they contribute to the still poorly defined though compelling narrative of the foiled terrorist attack and the young, well-educated Nigerian accused of attempting it.

Kurt and Lori Haskell were on their way back to Michigan from a Ugandan safari when they boarded Northwest Flight 253 in Amsterdam. In an interview with a local Michigan outlet, Mr. and Mrs. Haskell reported that as they sat near the gate waiting to board their flight, they witnessed a well-dressed man, who was accompanying a poorly dressed younger companion, trying to convince boarding agents to allow the poorly dressed man, whom they now recognize as Umar Abdulmutallab, to board the plane, despite not having a passport. Mr. Haskell recalls having his attention drawn to the shabby dress of the man without a passport and then listening with curiosity to the unusual conversation between the suited man and the ticket agent.

The ticket agent informed the well-dressed man that she would need to inform her manager of the situation, and the man in the suit responded by informing her, “He’s from Sudan. We do this all the time.” Abdulmutallab is Nigerian so Haskell suspects that the other man was trying to garner sympathy for Abdulmutallab by portraying him as a Sudanese refugee. At this point in the story, Mr. and Mrs. Haskell report that the two men were escorted by the airline representative to another location, and so they are unsure as to whether Abdulmutallab ultimately was permitted to board the plane without a passport.

Finally, the Haskells, attorneys specializing in bankruptcy and family law, were interviewed by the FBI along with all their fellow passengers. Mr. Haskell said that upon concluding his interview, he witnessed government agents taking two men into custody. A spokeswoman for the FBI field office in Detroit disputed Mr. Haskell’s story and claimed that Abdulmutallab was the only person arrested after the incident.



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Despite the American media's and law enforcement's disinterest in the Haskells' testimony, Dutch authorities have initiated an investigation into the possible complicity of the unidentified man who appeared to be helping Abdulmutallab by reviewing about 200 hours of security video shot by cameras aimed at the very gate where Haskell reports seeing the suspicious "well-dressed man."

Patricia Keepman of Wisconsin, who was traveling home with her husband and daughter after having adopted two children from Ethiopia, also boarded Flight 253 in Amsterdam. The Keepman family was seated some 20 rows behind Abdulmutallab when the Keepmans' daughter pointed out a man who was standing and calmly videotaping the cabin. "He sat up and videotaped the entire flight," Keepman reports. "I figured it was his first flight or something," she explained.

As in the case with the Haskells, Keepman reports that while awaiting debriefing by federal law enforcement, she learned that the FBI was interested in interrogating the man she saw recording the flight. Officially, however, the FBI denied such interest and claimed that the only person being investigated is the alleged attempted bomber, Umar Abdulmutallab.

Just days before the writing of this article, officials from the Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and the FBI recanted their previous statements and admitted that indeed, as the Haskells and others attested, there was another passenger arrested after Flight 253 landed in Detroit, and he was on board the Northwest Airline flight from Amsterdam that was very nearly brought out of the sky by Abdulmutallab.

In response to questions from reporters familiar with the Haskells', Keepmans', and other witnesses' testimonies, the CBP and FBI originally denied that there were any other suspects either questioned or detained after the debriefing of passengers. Days later they shifted their position by a degree and admitted that there was another man detained and led off in handcuffs, but he was not a passenger on board Flight 253, but rather a passenger from another flight that the authorities were temporarily detaining because he was a person of interest in the small interrogation room where the passengers from Flight 253 were being searched and questioned.

So, despite the logistically improbable and procedurally unbelievable scenario created by the CPB and FBI, representatives of those two agencies reluctantly recanted all their prior excuses and admitted that they do have a second suspect in custody — if only they would reveal exactly who he is, why he was arrested, and what the nature was of the threat he ostensibly poses or posed to the security of the United States.

Next, one of the most disturbing facts revealed in the investigative efforts made after the Christmas Day near-miss is the one reported days ago in the *Los Angeles Times*. According to reporters from that newspaper, during a pro forma check of passenger names against a database of potential threats, officials of the Customs and Border Patrol were made aware of Abdulmutallab's predilection for extremism and planned to question him as soon as Flight 253 arrived in Detroit.

That bit of crucial intelligence came a few hours late and nearly cost almost 300 people their lives. The timing and treatment of this information certainly lived up to the "shocking" label stuck to the intelligence community by President Obama. How is a check of passengers' potential threats after the plane is in the air of any help or at all protective of the safety of America or her citizens?

Abdulmutallab should never have been allowed on that plane, especially since his own father had singled him out to authorities as a terrorist threat months earlier. (See our article "[Insecure Americans, Abdulmutallab, & Terrorism](#).")

Next, on January 5, 2010, President Obama said that the government of the United States had sufficient



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information to discover and prevent a purported plot to blow up a plane bound for the United States. This information was of no practical value because of the failure of the various elements of the intelligence and security community to “connect the dots” that were so bright and obvious in hindsight. While not disclosing the precise size and color of the dots, there is no doubt that they were of sufficient size and of suspicious enough shape to warrant a dressing down of the entire national security team by their boss at the White House.

Another bit of off-putting information about the Christmas Day close call was that reported by Michael Isikoff of *Newsweek*. According to a blog on the *Newsweek* website, White House counterterrorism advisor John Brennan was briefed in October about an al-Qaeda-supported attempt to assassinate a Saudi official. The Saudi government reported that Prince Muhammad bin Nayef survived an attempt on his life perpetrated by a man trained and equipped by a Yemeni branch of al-Qaeda. Of particular note is the location wherein the attempted assassin hid the bomb he intended to use to kill himself and the Saudi prince — his underwear. That is to say, as early as October, high-level American counterterrorism officials knew that al-Qaeda in Yemen was dispatching killers with bombs secreted in their underwear.

Finally, the government of the United Kingdom knew three years ago that the would-be Detroit bomber had multiple and meaningful communications with Islamic extremists living in England. While studying at the University College London, Abdulmutallab sought out friendship and guidance from proponents of radical Muslim students and teachers already under surveillance by MI5, the British intelligence agency. As a result of these questionable relationships and overtures to ministers of extremists, Abdulmutallab was forbidden from renewing his student visa and effectively banned from entering the United Kingdom. British intelligence officials are unsure whether this crucial cache of information was ever passed on to their American colleagues.

The waters of this case are muddy and are unlikely to ever be clarified by inept intelligence officials here or abroad. The American public will probably never know how much our government knew; when they knew it; or why, in light of all the much-touted “interagency cooperation” facilitated by the Patriot Act, more wasn’t done to proactively address and prevent a known ally of al-Qaeda from boarding a plane bound for the United States of America, especially one with so many big, red flags stuck to his file. Despite the surfeit of questions and the dearth of answers, the indisputable fact is that there is plenty of egg to cover plenty of faces and enough crow for every culpable, incompetent agent to have seconds.

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