

Cover Story

AL QAEDA
ABAMA

They're Baaack

Three attacks by Al Qaeda in the past five months—one successful—show that the ghosts of 9/11 can still materialize and cause significant harm.

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In a New Year's Eve message, Dennis Blair, the national intelligence director, congratulated his colleagues for "weakening Al Qaeda's ability to plan, organize, finance, and carry out highly orchestrated attacks conducted by well-trained teams, like those in 9/11. Al Qaeda is diminished," he wrote, "as evidenced by the fact that they are sending inexperienced individuals without long association with Al Qaeda but susceptible to jihadist ideology."

brave attacks requires a level of flexibility, persistence, coordination, and—most of all—patience that characterizes a well-trained and resilient fighting force. These weren't one-off assaults like the myriad suicide bombings in Iraq and Afghanistan that seem to fade into the background noise of war.

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the man whose passengers subdued on Northwest Airlines Flight 253, managed to evade nearly every security hurdle the United States put in place after the 9/11 attacks to keep people like him off airplanes. Al Qaeda's willingness to send a—practically—relatively untrained and "inexperienced" young radical on this suicide mission doesn't signal its ignorance of tougher security. A more prudent analysis is that Qaeda planners either know that the aviation system is still permeable or are testing it to find out.

Likewise, the attacks on the Saudi Arabian prince and the CIA operatives in Afghanistan, which reveal judgmental deficiencies in the intelligence community that may prove far more disturbing than the miscues preceding the airline attack, show a terrorist organization capable of striking the inner core of its enemies' power. In both cases, the bombers were reportedly not frisked for explosives because officials believed that they were friendly assets.

The Saudi attacker claimed he was giving himself up to officials. The bomber in Afghanistan, according to intelligence sources, was a Jordanian "triple agent," who had convinced the American and Jordanian services that he was working for them, against Al Qaeda. The CIA employees who met with him believed that he had crucial new information about his prime objective: to get close to Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's No. 2. If he was a Qaeda plant, this bomber was not just any agent—he was *the* agent, a Guy Burgess of the war on terrorism, sent on the most difficult

and high-profile mission of all. Al Qaeda has gamed the system. Blair suggested that because the group wasn't using "teams" of operatives like the 19 men who attacked airliners in 2001 it was somehow smarter and less effective. It would be profoundly unwise and myopic to so characterize a network that can still sneak bombs onto airplanes and can lure seven CIA employees into a death trap. Al Qaeda is not weak. It is not on the mend. It is evolving. The United States, as recent events make painfully clear, is not adapting quickly enough to that evolution.

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Al Qaeda Adapts

We should focus not so much on the particulars of Al Qaeda's recent attacks but on what they reveal about the organization's ability

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab



The suspected Northwest Airlines bomber used the same kind of technique—a PETN underwear bomb—as did a Saudi assassin in August.

Wait a minute. Did Blair really mean that? In the span of just five days, Qaeda operatives managed to nearly bring down a commercial airliner with 289 passengers and crew bound for Detroit, and to kill seven CIA employees and one allied intelligence officer in Afghanistan—the deadliest attack on the spy agency in a quarter-century. The airline bombing attempt also bore uncanny similarities to the attempted assassination in August of Saudi Arabia's chief counter-terrorism official, Prince Mohammed bin Nayef. Like the man being held in the thwarted Northwest Airlines attack, the would-be assassin in Saudi Arabia hid explosives in his undergarments and had come from Yemen.

Al Qaeda hardly seems a weakened, unorchestrated crew fit, capable of striking the United States. Indeed, mounting such

operate in a dynamic environment in which its adversaries are constantly throwing up new roadblocks. In recent days, a range of security experts worried that even though Al Qaeda is not racking up a high body count, it remains strategically viable despite massive U.S. Predator attacks against its senior operatives in Pakistan and elsewhere. (See two preceding stories, pp. E1 and E2.) These experts also noted that Al Qaeda is repeating tactics and continues to seek out the same kinds of targets it has for many years—high-level officials and civilians.

The explosive PETN was used in both the Saudi assassination attempt and the thwarted Christmas bombing. Saudi officials believe that the assassin used a chemical ignition system that metal detectors would not pick up. Abdulmutallab is also reported to have used a liquid chemical, delivered via syringe, to ignite the solid compound hidden in his underwear. Fellow passengers tackled him when the device apparently failed to explode but set Abdulmutallab's pants on fire.

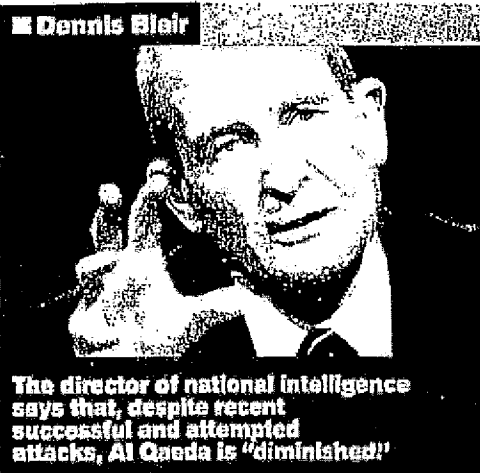
The assassin who died in the attack against Prince Nayef was a Saudi man who had fled to Yemen, where he is believed to have received his training and materials. President Obama said this week that Abdulmutallab had also been trained by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, as the chapter in Yemen is known. Several analysts have concluded that the attacks were not isolated events. "The method of concealment, the use of PETN, and the origin of the bomb—Yemen—make the Prince Nayef assassination attempt and the Northwest plot an almost perfect match," CNN terrorism analyst and author Peter Bergen wrote on December 27.

Author and terrorism expert David C. Gertenstein-Ross noted, "You have to look not at the number of plots but at the peripherals, what's going on." In the case of the two underwear bombers, said Gertenstein-Ross, who directs the Center for Terrorism Research at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies in Washington, "it's the same principle being used" to evade detection by security forces. "This shows that tactics, techniques, and procedures migrate... It shows sophistication. As we develop systems to detect weapons and the like, terrorists adapt to those systems."

Unstable Yemen

Troubling evidence of Al Qaeda's resurgence is emanating from Yemen. When confirming that Abdulmutallab received his training there, Obama also said, "Our intelligence community knew of other red flags—that Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula sought to strike not only at American targets in Yemen, but the United States itself."

Larry Korb, a senior fellow with the Center for American Progress, wrote on National Journal's *National Security* experts blog this week, "The U.S. has three immediate threats to its national security: rogue regimes like Iran and North Korea; violent extremists like Al Qaeda; and weak and failing states like Yemen that could and can become havens for violent extremists." Korb said that Al Qaeda has reconstituted itself by taking advantage of domestic chaos in Yemen brought on by plummeting oil rev-



Dennis Blair
The director of national intelligence says that, despite recent successful and attempted attacks, Al Qaeda is "diminished!"

enues, a civil war in the north, and a secessionist movement in the south. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula now numbers a couple hundred people, he said.

The United States has a long history of fighting terrorists in Yemen. In 2000, Qaeda bombers rammed the USS *Cole* docked in the Port of Aden, killing 17 sailors. Two years later, in a remote part of the country, a CIA-piloted Predator destroyed a car carrying six suspected Qaeda figures who were implicated in the *Cole* attack, including the chief of Al Qaeda's Yemen branch. The Yemeni government has never hidden the fact that it invited U.S. military and intelligence help. American forces

have led and assisted attacks on Qaeda forces and on combatants in Yemen's civil conflicts.

This week, the Obama administration sent strong signals that it considers Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula to be a linchpin in the terrorists' fight and thus a top danger to world security. "The instability in Yemen is a threat to regional stability and even global stability," Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said after a meeting with Qatar's foreign minister. "We're working with Qatar and others to think of the best way forward to try to deal with the security concerns. And certainly we know that this is a difficult set of challenges, but they have to be addressed."

The administration announced that it was upping its security assistance to Yemen, from \$40.3 million in fiscal 2009 to \$63 million in 2010, a figure that does not include money for counterterrorism operations. Obama has also asked for a "significant increase" in next year's aid budget for the country, according to a State Department spokesman. This week, Obama also announced that he would suspend transfers of Guantanamo Bay detainees to Yemen because of "an ongoing security situation which we have been confronting for some time, along with our Yemeni partners."

Yemen's central government is notoriously weak and disorganized. That power vacuum, along with the country's internal security dilemmas, complicates U.S. counterterrorism challenges.

An article called "Welcome to Qaedastan" in the January/February 2010 issue of *Foreign Policy* magazine underscores that the "combustible mix" of Yemen's poor security and weak government portends grave danger for U.S. security. "Together they might explode in 2010 if Al Qaeda consolidates its gains by taking advantage of a government in disarray," writes Gregory D. Johnson, co-author of the Yemeni affairs blog *King Al-Waq*. He notes that Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is "already the most regionally and economically representative of any group in the country [and] has only grown stronger over the past three years. Once disorganized and on the run," Johnson says, "today, Qaeda members are paying down roots by marrying into local tribes and establishing a durable infrastructure that can survive the loss of key commanders."

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