

This is an ICSR Insight produced by Senior Fellow, Shiraz Maher.

The latest edition of Al Qaeda's 'Inspire' reveals more details about the recent airline bomb plot which emanated in Yemen.

'Inspire' is an English-language magazine produced quarterly by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Its latest 'special edition' reveals more details of the plot and an insight in the strategic mindset of AQAP. The magazine is divided into three parts: a discussion of the strategic objectives (including its economic impact), the religious objectives, and technical information on the bomb itself.

Operational background

- AQAP called this project 'Operation Haemorrhage' (in the magazine they use the American spelling: 'Hemorrhage').
- AQAP claims to have caused a UPS jet to crash shortly after takeoff from Dubai on 3 September (more on the crash here). The crash has never been attributed to AQAP and was not believed to be suspicious until recently. If it transpires that AQAP was behind the crash then it is highly significant, not least because nine weeks passed between that and the ink cartridge plot. The magazine asks:

Why didn't the enemy reveal the truth about what happened with the downed UPS plane?
Is it because the enemy could not discover why the plane was brought down?

[...]

We would like to say to Obama: We have struck against your aircrafts twice within one year and we will continue directing our blows towards your interests and the interests of your allies.

- The authors of Inspire say the bomb makers were so confident of their success, and had such ambitious expectations of what the plot would achieve that they placed a copy of Charles Dickens' Great Expectations into one of the boxes. Anwar al-Awlaki, AQAP's chief theoretician, has also spoken about Dickens in the past on his now defunct blog. During his incarceration in Yemen, Awlaki was not allowed to read Islamic texts and instead had to make-do with English novels. He came to admire Dickens, noting:

I read Hard Times thrice. So, I ordered more Charles Dickens and read Tale of Two Cities, Great Expectations, Oliver Twist, and his masterpiece: David Copperfield. I read this one twice.

What fascinated me with these novels were the amazing characters Dickens created and the similarity of some of them to some people today. That made them very interesting. For example: the thick and boastful Mr. Josiah Bounderby of Coketown was similar to George W. Bush; Lucy's father, Mr. Gradgrind, was similar to some Muslim parents who are programmed to think that only Medicine and Engineering are worthy professions for their children; the amazing cruelty of Stephen Blackpool was similar to some people who appear on the surface to be decent and kind human beings; and Uriah Heep was similar to some pitiful Muslims today.

Strategic Objectives

- It now seems clear that the primary objective of this attack was not the synagogues to which the

parcels were addressed. The objective of the plot is discussed twice in different articles. The first says:

The operation was to be based on two factors: The first is that the packages pass through the latest security equipment. The second, the spread of fear that would cause the West to invest billions of dollars in new security procedures.

The other states:

From the start our objective was economic. Bringing down a cargo plane would only kill a pilot and co-pilot.

- The 'head of operations' claims that the primary aim was economic:

The air freight is a multi-billion dollar industry...For the trade between North America and Europe air cargo is indispensable and to be able to force the West to install stringent security measures sufficient enough to stop our explosive devices would add a heavy economic burden to an already faltering economy.

- According to the magazine, the ink cartridge plot cost AQAP just \$4200 (£2615), demonstrating how a relatively cheap operation can still inflict massive economic and financial damage. This is something AQAP is keen to underscore, telling readers:

Two Nokia mobiles, \$150 each, two HP printers, \$300 each, plus shipping, transportation and other miscellaneous expenses add up to a total bill of \$4,200. That is all what Operation Hemorrhage cost us. In terms of time it took us three months to plan and execute the operation from beginning to end. On the other hand this supposedly "foiled plot", as some of our enemies would like to call, will without a doubt cost America and other Western countries billions of dollars in new security measures. That is what we call leverage. A \$4,200 operation will cost our enemy billions of dollars. In terms of time and effort, three months of work for a team of less than six brothers would end up costing the West hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of hours of work in an attempt to protect itself from our packages of death.

The plot itself

- AQAP confirms that the explosive substance it used was PETN (340 grams per bomb). PETN is a powerful explosive and is very difficult to detect. They boast:

With all the intelligence information the enemy had, they could not detect the explosives even though the printers were inspected twice in the UK. They only discovered the explosives when they had the exact tracking number of the package.

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab – the 'underpants bomber' – also used a bomb made of PETN, and managed to carry it onto a flight bound for Detroit last Christmas. The bomb may have failed, but, having been constructed in Yemen, it was carried by Abdulmutallab on three different commercial aircraft, passing through security on each occasion. The third airport, Amsterdam Schiphol, employs some of most sophisticated detection equipment in the world and was an early adopter of the controversial full body scanner.

- It is clear the group has a sophisticated understanding of how current airport screening equipment works. They boast:

We have studied various X-Ray scanners that are in use and those that might be deployed in the future but are too expensive to deploy now. All these scanners work on one principle even if they are different.

There are more details in the magazine relating to the manner in which screening systems work.

- The 'technical' section of the magazine offers a lot of information about the bomb and how AQAP evaded detection. They brand conventional airport metal detectors as 'amateurish'.

- The reason for addressing these packages to the synagogues appears to be primarily symbolic. A passage in the magazine reveals:

How can we forget [Palestine] when our motto is: "Here we start and in al-Aqsa we meet"? So we listed the address of the "Congregation Or Chadash", a Gay and Lesbian synagogue on our one of our packages. The second package was sent to "Congregation B'nai Zion". Both synagogues are in Chicago, Obama's city.

The names of the recipients are also revealed, along with the rationale behind those choices:

This current battle fought by the West is not an isolated battle but is a continuation of a long history of aggression by the West against the Muslim world. In order to revive and bring back this history we listed the names of Reynald Krak and Diego Diaz as the recipients of the packages. We got the former name from Reynald de Chatillon, the lord of Krak des Chevaliers who was one of the worst and most treacherous of the Crusade's leaders. He fell into captivity and Salahuddeen personally beheaded him. The name we used for the second package was derived from that of Don Diego Deza, the Inquisitor General of the Spanish Inquisition after the fall of Granada who along with the Spanish monarchy supervised the extermination and expulsion of the Muslim presence on the Iberian Peninsula employing the most horrific methods of torture and done in the name of God and the Church. Today we are facing a coalition of Crusaders and Zionists and we in al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula will never forget Palestine.

AQAP remains incandescent at the Saudi regime for thwarting their plot:

We would like to tell the al-Saud government that Allah has exposed your treason and collaboration with the Zionists. The packages were being sent to Jewish [sic] synagogues and yet you interfered to defend them. May Allah's curse be upon the transgressors.

Strategic implications

- AQAP is clearly goading Western intelligence services. The magazine is littered with direct and rhetorical taunts aimed at security officials, celebrating AQAP's ability to have repeatedly breached airport security procedures. The magazine says:

We are waiting for the intelligent US intelligence to tell us how we downed the UPS flight out of Dubai on the 3rd of September. Was it an incendiary or explosive device? Was it sent from Sana'a or somewhere else? [...] Isn't it funny how America thinks AQAP has only one major bomb maker?

Elsewhere they ask:

Didn't your security experts come together to find solutions for the security lapses in your airports and you spent millions of dollars in less than a year even though we already told you then that we knew the weak points of your equipment and by the will of Allah we would be able to exploit them? Nevertheless you were stubborn. [...] The British government said that if a toner weighs more than 500 grams it won't be allowed on board a plane. Who is the genius who came up with this suggestion? Do you think that we have nothing to send but printers?

In another direct reference to security and intelligence agencies, the group promises:

Another suggestion is that the bomb maker needs to be killed... Do you think that our research will only be used by al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula and won't be shared with other mujahidin?

- AQAP has become the leading force for inciting Western Muslims to Jihad. Their message is sharply focused on inspiring individuals to launch a series of small-scale attacks which would be almost impossible to detect or stop. Roshanara Choudhary, the student who stabbed Stephen Timms MP in 'revenge' for the Iraq war embodies that spirit. She was not radicalised by Inspire but by AQAP's chief theoretician, Anwar al-Awlaki. The magazine advises readers:

... Hasten to join the ranks of the mujahidin or to form cells to perform operations against the disbelievers in their own land. We are paying back America for only a small portion of what they do to our nation.

This is similar to the exhortations in previous editions of Inspire, calling on Muslims in the West to launch sudden, random and small-scale attacks.

- AQAP demonstrates its characteristic sense of theatre and appreciation of propaganda. The

magazine carries several pages of quotes from the American media, experts and pundits on the ink cartridge plot, underscoring just how closely the press is monitored. The distinctly American nature of the cultural referencing by AQAP – no British press is mentioned – is almost certainly borne of the American jihadists who moved to Yemen, including Anwar al-Awlaki and Samir Khan.

- There is a final point to be made. Debate has raged among scholars and security officials about the true significance of Inspire magazine. I have personally been of the opinion that the magazine is very significant, although questions have persisted over its authenticity and utility. Why would AQAP want to put so much information about itself into the public domain? This special edition names some of the bomb makers and reveals their previous history of fighting jihad in Afghanistan. It is impossible to know AQAP's exact reasons for choosing to reveal this. What is clear, however, is that Inspire magazine is coming from members of AQAP – or, at the very least, from those with almost unfettered access to it. That much is confirmed by the technical information included in the magazine and by three pictures of the bomb taken before it was dispatched (including a picture of the Great Expectations book).

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