

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Washington Post Defines Worst Fears Down

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“Al-Qaeda bombmaker represents CIA’s worst fears.”

That’s the headline of a *Washington Post* [story](#) on Yemeni terrorists’ attempt to down a U.S. bound flight by placing a bomb on the body of an operative that [turned out](#) to be a CIA and Saudi agent. By straining to alarm readers about the bombmaker, Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri, the story makes three errors. First, by defining the CIA’s “worst fears” as “a highly skilled terrorist determined to attack the United States,” the *Post* underestimates the [imaginative capacity](#) of intelligence officials and overrates Asiri’s prowess. The article uncritically quotes House Homeland Security Committee chairman Peter King’s claim that “Asiri is an evil genius. He is constantly expanding, he is constantly adjusting.” Whatever King means by “expanding,” “failing” would have been a better choice of words. In just one of the four Asiri plots mentioned in article did his bomb detonate properly. That one killed only its bearer, al-Asiri’s brother. The nearby target, Saudi’s Prince Nayef, suffered only minor wounds.

Second, the article dubiously claims that two of those plots nearly wreaked great damage:

If it were not for a technical problem (Abdulmutallab's device failed to detonate) or solid intelligence tips (Saudi counterterrorism officials alerted authorities in Dubai and Britain to intercept the cargo planes), Asiri would have succeeded in staging a catastrophic disaster in American skies.

It is, however, questionable whether Abdulmutallab's bomb, had it properly detonated, was powerful enough to cause his plane to crash. Even if it opened a hole, the plane might not have crashed.

In the second case, where bombs were hidden in printer cartridges on cargo planes, authorities tell us the detonators probably would have worked and could have downed the planes. But there remains a decent chance that detonation would have occurred while the planes were on the ground. Also, one reason that the devices made it on to cargo planes without detection is that they contain few people and thus justify less security. The death of a crew would have been tragic, of course, but "catastrophic disaster" is a stretch.

The likely success of terrorist plots can't be assessed simply by looking at the stage of the plot that caused its failure. As Jim Harper argues, plots require success in a series of tasks, each of which drives down the odds of overall success. Bombs that are both difficult to detect and easy to detonate are tough to make, and competent bombers are hard to find. Borders have guards. Intelligence services employ double agents.

The article's third error is its assertion that the Yemeni branch of al Qaeda has "taken advantage of Yemen's political turmoil and seized large swaths of territory in the south." That language conflates the terrorist group with a broader insurgency, confuses their goals, and overstates the group's potency.

The misperception invites a broad U.S. campaign against Yemen's southern Islamists, which could heighten their enthusiasm for attacking Americans, creating the menace we feared.

Let's review the record of the bombmaker who is labeled our "worst fear." His organization has made no discernible progress towards its murky political objectives—though its Islamist protectors have gained territory amid a power vacuum. He has never produced mass violence nor apparently come close, and his most successful act of terrorism was to help his brother blow himself up. His next best effort resulted in a severe crotch burn for the bomber, who survived, talked to U.S. authorities for months, and is serving a life sentence.

That is "success" only under an exceedingly capacious definition. Bin Laden and his acolytes are being grandiose when they talk about bankrupting us. But their boasts show that "terrorism" remains a good label for their misbegotten efforts. They sustain their endeavors by imagining that violence, by generating fear and cost, will cause their enemy to fold and to accommodate their goals. By hyping their menace, we help them cling to that fantasy.