

NORTHWEST AIRLINES FLIGHT 253

Situation: Nigerian citizen attempts to detonate bomb on transatlantic flight.

On 24 December 2009, a 23-year-old Nigerian, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, allegedly attempted to down a transatlantic flight by detonating explosives concealed in his clothing. The response of airline passengers and flight crew helped avoid a tragedy with the potential to kill all 290 people onboard.



The attack on Northwest Airlines Flight 253 demonstrates the ability of terrorists to plan and execute potentially devastating attacks with relatively primitive means. The attack also demonstrates the ability of terrorist organizations to defeat sophisticated security measures at tightly controlled facilities.

Security personnel cannot recognize and eliminate all threats. You should remain vigilant at all times, even when in areas with strong security measures.



Abdulmutallab was born in Lagos, Nigeria to one of the wealthiest families in Africa. His father, Alhaji Umaru Mutallab, is a former chairman of the First Bank of Nigeria and a Federal Commissioner for Economic Development. Abdulmutallab, the youngest of sixteen children, spent his childhood at family homes in Nairobi, Kenya and the Kaduna region of Nigeria, an affluent area in the Muslim dominated north of the country.

Abdulmutallab was known to be a devout Muslim. At the British International School in Lome, Togo, where Abdulmutallab attended high school, he was generally liked by instructors and other students. However, Abdulmutallab repeatedly defended the Taliban and Muslim extremists in classroom discussions. Due to his deeply held religious beliefs, fellow students referred to him as "Alfa", a term used for Muslim clerics.

Support for radical and extremist positions can indicate a possible insider threat. If you witness such indicators consider contacting security personnel or local law enforcement.

Abdulmutallab's religious beliefs began to radicalize in 2004 when he enrolled in the San'a Institute for Arabic Language in Sana'a, Yemen. In Yemen, Abdulmutallab explored his religious ideals and attended lectures at Iman University. Iman University has been accused of teaching a



radical interpretation of the Quran and fermenting religious extremism. Abdul-Majid al-Zindani, the founder of the university, has been designated as a terrorist by the United States and was a religious advisor to Osama Bin Laden. Several students have been linked to terrorist attacks and political assassinations. And Anwar al-Awlaki, the radical American born cleric with ties to 9/11 took classes at the university and served as a guest lecturer.

Abdulmutallab's shift toward radical Islam showed in his postings on Facebook and an Islamic forum discussion board. In 2004, Abdulmutallab's postings focused on questions of Islamic etiquette and general faith. However, in 2005, his postings turned towards jihad and his view that Muslims were being oppressed. In February 2005, Abdulmutallab posted "Alright, i wont go into too much details about me fantasy, but basically they are jihad fantisies. I imagine how the great jihad will take place, how the muslims will win insha Allah and rule the whole world, and establish the greatest empire once again!!! (sic)." Three months later, in a discussion on the treatment of captured Muslim extremists, Abdulmutallab stated "i thought once they are arrested, no one hears about them for life and the keys to their prison wards are thrown away. That's what I heard sheikh faisal of UK say (he has also been arrested i heard) (sic)."

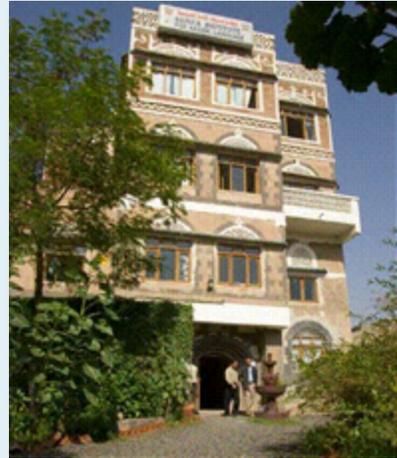
[Associations with radical groups and organizations with ties to terrorism can indicate a possible insider threat. If you witness such indicators contact security personnel or local law enforcement.](#)



In September 2005, Abdulmutallab began a degree program in engineering at the University College London in England. While there he became president of the school's Islamic Society. As president, Abdulmutallab decided to host a "War on Terror" conference from the Muslim perspective. The conference included a speaker that was a former Guantanamo Bay detainee and a discussion panel on jihad from the Muslim perspective. During his time in London, Abdulmutallab did not cause problems at his university or have encounters with law enforcement, but his associations with Muslim extremists were noted by MI-5. In June 2008, Abdulmutallab completed his degree and left the country. For the next few months, Abdulmutallab travelled to the US and Nigeria.

In January 2009, Abdulmutallab enrolled in a master's program at the University of Wollongong in Dubai. While in Dubai, it is suspected that Abdulmutallab had contact with Anwar al-Awlaki, and that al-Awlaki may have convinced Abdulmutallab to return to Yemen. In July, Abdulmutallab received his father's consent to resume his studies of Arabic language at the San'a Institute for a period of two months.

Abdulmutallab returned to Yemen in August 2009. Almost immediately he skipped classes at the San'a Institute in favor of lectures at Iman University. In October, Abdulmutallab sent text messages to his father stating he would not return to Dubai but would remain in Yemen to study sharia. Abdulmutallab never resumed his studies and instead traveled to the mountainous Shabwah Province for terrorist training.



Abdulmutallab's father was alarmed at his son's actions and contents of his text messages. Text messages sent to his Abdulmutallab's father include. "I've found a new religion, the real Islam" and "Forgive me for any wrongdoing, I am no longer your child." Abdulmutallab's father went to the US embassy in Nigeria and reported the behavior to CIA officials. Abdulmutallab's name was added to the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment but not the No Fly List.

[Erratic behavior, mood swings, and breaks from a person's traditional beliefs and associations may indicate emotional problems or a developing hostile mindset. You should report such behavior to your supervisor. If you perceive an immediate threat contact security personnel or local law enforcement.](#)



In mid-December, Abdulmutallab traveled to Ghana where he paid cash for a round trip ticket from Lagos, Nigeria to Detroit. Abdulmutallab left Lagos on 24 December at 11:00 p.m. on a KLM flight to Amsterdam and then connected to his flight to Detroit. In Amsterdam, Abdulmutallab did not check any luggage at the ticketing counter. Northwest Flight 253 left Amsterdam at 8:45 a.m. bound for Detroit. On board were 279 passengers, eight flight attendants, and three pilots.

As the plane approached Detroit, Abdulmutallab went to the plane's lavatory for about twenty minutes. Upon returning to his seat he complained of an upset stomach and pulled his blanket up over him.

[Unusual behavior such as paying cash for items usually paid for with credit may indicate a threat. If you witness such indicators consider contacting security personnel or local law enforcement.](#)

About twenty minutes from Detroit, Abdulmutallab allegedly attempted to detonate a bomb comprising 2.8 oz. of PETN. The bomb had been sewn into his underwear, and using the blanket to conceal his activities, Abdulmutallab injected a



syringe of acid into the device to cause a chemical reaction. Fortunately, the device did not completely detonate, but it did make popping sounds, send smoke into the cabin, and send flames two to three feet into the air.

Flight 253 did not have air marshals on board. However, the flight crew and passengers responded to the incident. One passenger, Jasper Shirnga, overpowered Abdulmutallab, grabbed the burning mass from between his legs, and threw it on the floor. A flight attendant extinguished the bomb as it lay on the floor as another passenger grabbed the melting syringe from Abdulmutallab's hand. Shirnga moved Abdulmutallab to the business class cabin, stripped his clothes to search for additional bombs, and handcuffed him with the plane's handcuffs.

In an attempted skyjacking you must decide how to respond. Among other things, your actions should be guided by your perception of the skyjackers' intent, your personal ability to respond, and the presence of sky marshals.



Two passengers were injured during the incident. Jasper Shirnga, who pulled the burning device from Abdulmutallab's lap received burns to his hands. Another passenger also received minor injuries. After the plane landed, Abdulmutallab was removed from the plane by law enforcement while the other passengers were interviewed and re-screened.

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab suffered first and second degree burns to his inner thigh and genitals. In October 2011, Abdulmutallab pled guilty to eight charges, including conspiring to commit terrorism, and was sentenced to four consecutive life sentences plus fifty years. He is currently serving his sentence at ADX Florence in Fremont County, Colorado.