

HSPI Commentary Series

ALL HANDS—AND EYES—NEEDED ON DECK

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A spate of recent cases, from Christmas Day to Times Square, have highlighted the shrinking distance between Aden or Abuja and Manhattan or Manchester. As global meets local, information sharing becomes the currency of the realm. Yet a Senate Committee Report released last week highlights continued, significant deficiencies in this area. In its unclassified study of the Christmas Day case, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence identifies more than a dozen “points of failure” including the following: State Department did not revoke the bomber’s US visa; and he was not placed on a watch list (other than a database half a million strong), or on the no fly list.¹ This, despite the fact that Abdulmutallab's application for a UK visa was rejected in 2008 (he provided false information to authorities). Multiple errors and problems certainly occurred stateside in this case. Beyond borders however, there is also room for systemic improvement.

Proactive measures, building upon existing international partnerships, are needed to regularize the sharing of visa revocation, watch list, and no fly data between and among countries to enhance our capacity to prevent terrorism. A good base to leverage would be the so-called “five eyes”—the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand—which already share a close and productive working relationship which has yielded valuable benefits over time. Now may be a propitious moment to seriously consider extending the parameters of that alliance. To be clear, neither sources nor methods would need to be disclosed. Instead, the focus could be on data, which would then form the basis for further conversations and discussions as needed. The idea is simply to move toward creating the capacity to check “hot” names in real time, so as to reach a sound board/no-board (or list/no-list, or visa/no-visa) decision that serves to better protect the traveling public and communities here at home.

¹ <http://intelligence.senate.gov/100518/1225report.pdf>



Even within a relatively small group of countries that shares certain core values and common objectives, however, the challenges inherent in such an initiative should not be underestimated. Legal issues, for instance, are likely to be many and complex; and their content as well as salience may vary from state to state. In America, for example, there exist a range of restrictions regarding the sharing of information about “US persons.” Another set of factors likely to complicate the task at hand are cultural issues, in the sense of organizational culture, meaning that of the law enforcement and intelligence communities, and so on. Foreign intelligence agencies remain wary of one another, even where “friendlies” are concerned. And technology may also present a significant challenge, with varying capabilities and capacities between and among partners making it difficult to share information, even when the will to do so exists on the part of the moving partner.

But we simply cannot afford to allow these potential hurdles to stand in our way. The consequences of doing so are too grave in an era marked by a creative and committed adversary. While security officials in the US and abroad may, understandably, not be as nimble as those against whom they are squaring off, authorities here and elsewhere have shown an encouraging willingness to adapt. Intelligence and law enforcement efforts, for instance, have become more integrated over time; and the overarching culture has begun to change so that the first question asked is, “what do we know about the problem?” This is of course the crucial query; and the more data, particularly of the targeted (case-relevant) variety, the better. To the extent that we can positively affect the quality and quantity of that information, we should, since that foundation will serve as a guide for subsequent action, and hopefully enhance our terrorism prevention capabilities.

Slowly but surely, as confidence builds and real results are demonstrated, the arrangement described could perhaps be extended to other close allies. Granted, the wider the circle of trust, the greater may be the chance that it is compromised. For this reason, it would be wise to begin with small but sensible steps that could achieve real impact. At the same time, we would do well to bear in mind that although intelligence is the lifeblood of prevention, a multilayered defense remains a necessity.

In an ideal world there would not be a next time. Wishing it so will not make it so, however. Let’s not put ourselves in the position of asking, again, whether there was anything obvious, or at least within reach, that could have been done to bolster our guard. Instead, let’s try to get ahead of the curve and build on what has proved both powerful and successful—not just the five eyes, but also the network of strong cross-border relationships that exist over and above it at the working level, between and among individual law enforcement and intelligence officials who operate at the tip of the spear every day in the service of this nation and others.



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