

Terrorist Plot Thwarted

U.K., U.S. Raise Security Threat Levels

Steven Weber_Terrorism Expert_Thursday, August 10, 2006; 11:00 AM

British authorities said Thursday they had disrupted a well-advanced "major terrorist plot" to blow up passenger flights between the United Kingdom and the United States with liquid explosives, prompting a full-scale security clampdown at U.S. and British airports and a cascade of delays in trans-Atlantic flights.

More: [Britain Thwarts Airline Terror Plot](#) (*Post, Aug. 10*)

Terrorism expert **Steven Weber** was online **Thursday, Aug. 10, at 11 a.m. ET** to discuss the facts of today's uncovered plot.

Weber is professor of political science and director of the Institute of International Studies at U.C. Berkeley and has held academic fellowships with the Council on Foreign Relations and worked with the U.S. State Department and other government agencies on foreign policy issues, risk analysis and forecasting. In 2000, he was a consultant to the U.S. Commission on National Security in the 21st Century.

A transcript follows.

Steven Weber: Good morning.

Today's news is important because it provides a significant 'data point'.

There has, as everyone knows, been a huge amount of argument and speculation about the war on terror, the effectiveness of our efforts against Al Qaeda, the nature of the threat going forward... etc.

Today we are learning some very important lessons to take forward.

I hope during this half hour we can discuss what those lessons are and what national authorities need to do next.

Steven Weber: Please ask questions.

Wheaton, Md.: Do you believe there is any connection between this terrorist plot and Israel's ongoing

war with the terrorists in Lebanon and Gaza?

Steven Weber: It's unlikely a specific connection. From what we know about 9-11, it takes a significant amount of time and effort to plan a coordinated attack of this sort. It's likely the planning started a year or more ago.

But that doesn't mean that the timing of the intended attack might not have been influenced by events in the Middle East. Somebody decided that this was the time to 'pull the trigger'.

Amman, Jordan: Are the British still confident that al Qaeda is responsible or is it possible Hezbollah is involved?

Steven Weber: We can be sure of a couple of things on this point:

1. There will be a huge number of rumors about who or what is 'responsible' particularly since the attack did not occur.
2. Anyone who tells you they know 'for certain' probably doesn't, because the intelligence is likely to be both very fragmentary and very classified.

So -- I would be very cautious about drawing any quick conclusions.

Arlington, Va.: I've heard that security lines are 4-6 hours long in most major airports. Will airline passengers tolerate this, or will this be another blow to the airline industry? I've already canceled my upcoming flight for vacation. I'd rather drive.

Steven Weber: My sense is that it depends entirely on how long the added security is in place. People have been remarkably adaptive to the new screening procedures.... we're all used to it by now. The current situation is going to be very messy, though, at least for the present

Hamburg, Germany: Since it is not practical to ban all liquids from flights (at least not for long), shouldn't security be focusing more on people as a threat, not items?

Steven Weber: This is a very important question. The problem is, how do we know what 'people' to focus on? Think about what this means in terms of racial profiling, for example. And even if that were permissible, wouldn't it simply increase the incentive of terrorists to recruit people who don't 'look' a certain way?

Washington, D.C.: Sir,

What do you believe has done more in the last five years to thwart terrorists: large scale military actions in foreign nations or good old-fashioned police work?

Steven Weber: Undoubtedly the most important question in play today. Donald Rumsfeld has said, 'are we killing and capturing more terrorists each day, than we are creating'? I think the answer to that question, at least in Iraq, is pretty clear. Which means, stopping a terrorist from taking a bomb onto an airplane is very close to closing the barn door after the horses have run out. It's the very last step in a process that began long before....

yes we have to have the last line of defense in place and as close to impregnable as it can be.

but in no way can that ever be as efficient a response as getting closer to the sources of the problem.

Santa Fe, N.M.: It seems to me that liquid explosives can be transported in faux "fat" packs or even sealed in plastic and inserted into body orifices. How can security possibly detect all the creative ways that people can dream up to smuggle liquids?

Steven Weber: We can't.

I think we've been very lucky so far, that our security procedures have not been bypassed.

There are a lot of creative people in the world who spend a lot of time thinking about how to design around security procedures. And there is always a way, there is always a loose link in the chain.

the best analogy here is to computer security. the smartest programmers in the world know that they can never beat the smartest hackers once and for all. it's a constant race, cat and mouse.

Vienna, Va.: What role, if any, do you think Patriot Act provisions played in the arrest? Domestic surveillance?

Steven Weber: It's hard to say, at this point, to what degree US intelligence contributed directly to these arrests. That's not been made public, and I suspect it won't be for some time, if ever. The British have a different set of rules for what they can and cannot do at home; much more permissive of police intrusions in some respects than the US. But don't expect to get a lot of clear information about just how this plot was uncovered. And do expect that the information you are given may very well be designed to deceive rather than inform -- after all, you don't want future plotters to know the truth do you?

"Sophisticated" terrorists: The media is hammering home the point that the administration thinks this

is connected to al Qaeda because of the "sophisticated" plot to use common elements to create an explosive device. Timothy McVeigh did the same kind of thing 11 years ago and nobody accused him of being "sophisticated." From what you know of this case, is it fair to call it "sophisticated" and does that automatically place it in the bailiwick of al Qaeda? Thank you.

Steven Weber: I think by 'sophisticated' we mean a set of coordinated attacks - more than one plane, in this case. What's important here, I suspect, is the notion that it wasn't a lone ranger or just a group of two or three people... but a larger group, 20 or more, that was able to coordinate its activity and plan something more 'spectacular'... on the order of Sept 11.

This is important because many terrorism experts are now claiming that in the last 5 years, we've cut the 'head' off Al Qaeda and seriously diminished their capability to carry out large scale coordinated attacks.

I believe today's news proves that argument to be patently false.

Washington, D.C.: Why is it that terrorists have targeted such an obvious target as airplanes? They know there's heightened security surrounding airplane travel. In your opinion, why don't they go after more vulnerable targets, like a random apartment complex or shopping mall, etc?

Steven Weber: Really interesting question. We should always remember that we can't get inside the heads of these people, so what we say to each other about this is just our effort to impose our logic on their thinking... and it could be completely wrong.

that said -- airplanes have long been a favorite target. why? I think it's visibility, pure and simple. look, as many people will die today in auto accidents on us freeways as die in a plane crash. the latter makes the front page of the newspapers.

it's also the case that since we've poured such enormous resources into airplane security, for terrorists to succeed in what ought to be our most well defended place, suggests the following message: we can hurt you anywhere, no matter how hard you try to stop us.

Oakland, Calif.: How do you see this effective use of surveillance to stop a potentially catastrophic terrorist plot affecting the discussion of domestic electronic surveillance and civil liberties in the U.S.?

Steven Weber: Undoubtedly it will be in play during the 2006 midterm elections. I would expect candidates to be talking about their views on this during the next few days. To a degree you should expect people to be competing for 'toughness' again.

That said, the balancing act around civil liberties is one of the hardest decisions we have to make as a society (and have to keep making) over the next decade. Periods of fear and crisis are very bad times to make big decisions about things like this.

We need to lean into these questions during periods of relative calm, when we can better parse out the stakes. Now is not the time to be passing new laws, for example

New York City: What is the direct goal of the terrorists in this particular plot?

Steven Weber: It's very hard to say.

I suspect it was an effort to prove that terrorists can still attack the precise targets to which we've devoted so much energy and money toward securing. 'If they can hit our airplanes, then they can hit us anywhere. '

It is interesting, though.. as another questioner mentioned, why not blow up a few shopping malls across the US? that would probably have a greater economic impact...

it suggests that economic impacts are not the primary calculus here. maybe fear is.

but at the end of the day, we just don't know.

Minneapolis, Minn.: It's probably difficult to say, but do you think that in spite of the politics, cronyism, the giant bureaucracy of Homeland Security, the gaffes in FEMA, fight for control of spying between the Pentagon and CIA, etc. ... that today's disruption a sign that we are better prepared to track and fight terrorists than, say, in the months leading up to 9/11?

Steven Weber: Are we safer now than we were before 9-11?

probably. We FELT safe before 9-11 because we were blissfully unaware of what was happening just below the surface.

In the last 5 years, we've focused a huge amount of resources on terrorism, and that has undoubtedly had some payoff.

if we had unlimited resources, that would be enough.

but we don't, and the real question has to be, are we making the best choices we can about reducing the risks?

your question answers itself in that context

New Windsor, N.Y.: Why is the U.K. the target recently for terrorist attacks? Is it just its "convenient" location? Or is there something in its policies that make it more likely, especially compared to this

country's policies?

Steven Weber: This suggests that US immigration controls have in fact become substantially more effective at keeping potential terrorists out of the US. After all, the U.S. is the real "far enemy" of Al Qaeda. Britain is important, but not the U.S.

But I don't take a lot of comfort in knowing that. Because the stakes of an attack in the U.S. are so high, I am sure that we will see these efforts extend across the Atlantic. I don't know when, I don't know how. But it's inevitable.

Washington, D.C.: What about those missing Egyptian students?

Even if they 'turn up' later, and claim they were lost or sight-seeing, who is to say they weren't playing roles as couriers for terrorist cells that are already established here?

Could they be involved as part of a 'global connection' that the BBC referred to today in its broadcast?

Steven Weber: Hard to be certain.

But let's always keep in mind the risk of too many 'false alarms'. Every day there will be false alarms... and if we get too focused on each and every thing like this, pretty soon you start to lose sensitivity... the boy who cried wolf phenomenon.

when your car alarm goes off all the time for no reason, what do you do? you turn it off, or ignore it.

Washington, D.C.: Just today it was reported that two men were arrested with connections to Dearborn Michigan; and they had purchased 600 cell phones and had information about flights. Do you see a connection? Proof of domestic cells?

Steven Weber: After an announcement like today's, it's typical to see a flurry of activity -- arrests, announcements, accusations...don't be too quick to draw connections.

Arlington, Va.: The Brits sure seem to be having a lot of success in infiltrating terrorist groups. I feel like I hear about a lot more arrests than we have here in the U.S., at finding actual cells with actual plans to carry out terrorist plots. Is the U.S. just not publicizing what they have stopped? What is the difference between U.S. efforts and British efforts?

Steven Weber: Thank you very much for these good questions. Unfortunately I'm done for the morning.

My overall message to everyone: don't jump to conclusions about this news. It's very early in the

investigation, there are lots of secrets, and there will be a lot of pundits claiming they know things that they don't know. Distinguish between facts and suspicions. And stay calm.

The key is to recognize how much we don't know, and use these events to try to learn faster and better about our adversaries, than our adversaries learn about us.

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