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Obama's Security 'Breach'

Returning Gitmo's detainees to Yemen defies common sense.

President Obama has belatedly declared that the near miss above Detroit constituted "a catastrophic breach of security" and ordered a review of America's intelligence efforts. We're glad to hear it, but let's hope the Commander in Chief also rethinks his own approach to counterterrorism.

Recent events have exposed the shortcomings of treating terror as a law enforcement problem and rushing to close Guantanamo Bay. A new wave of jihadists is coming of age, inspiring last month's deadly attack at Ft. Hood and nearly bringing down Northwest Flight 253, and next time we may not be so lucky.

Their latest sanctuary lies in unruly Yemen, headquarters for al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, which last year pulled off a series of local bombings, including at the U.S. embassy in the capital Sana, killing 13. The al Qaeda chapter in Yemen has re-emerged under the leadership of a former secretary to Osama bin Laden.

Along with a dozen other al Qaeda members, he was allowed to escape from a Yemeni jail in 2006. His deputy, Saïd Ali al-Shihri, was a Saudi inmate at Gitmo who after his release "graduated" from that country's terrorist "rehabilitation" program before moving to Yemen last year. About a fifth of the so-called graduates have ended back on the Saudi terror most-wanted list, according to a GAO study this year.

U.S. investigators are looking into whether Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the 23-year-old Nigerian would-be bomber, was in contact with al-Shihri and another Guantanamo alum who turned up at the AQAP, Muhammad al-Awfi. The week before Christmas, Yemen agreed, presumably under U.S. prodding, to take back six more Guantanamo detainees. Ninety-seven of the 210 left at Gitmo are from Yemen, and if this transfer goes smoothly, the Administration wants to repatriate many more. Most are such hard terror cases that this year even Saudi Arabia rejected U.S. entreaties to accept them.

A Pentagon analysis, released in May, showed that one in seven freed Gitmo detainees—61 in all—returned to terrorism. Al-Shihri and Abdullah Ghulam Rasoul, the Taliban's operations leader in southern Afghanistan, are merely the best known. The Pentagon has since updated its findings, and we're told the numbers are even worse.

Yet the White House has resisted calls by Members of the House and Senate intelligence committees to declassify this revised report—no doubt because that would make closing Gitmo harder. Congress should insist on its release.

This second generation of al Qaeda also makes good use of modern technology for recruitment. A student from a wealthy family, Abdulmutallab was exposed to radical Islam through the Internet, and according to some reports was a "big fan" of the imam Anwar Al-Awlaki, who ran a popular jihadi Web site and Facebook page. This 38-year-old cleric, who was born in the U.S., is the spiritual leader of AQAP.

Al-Awlaki was also in email contact with Major Nidal Hasan in the months before the Army doctor shot and

killed 13 U.S. soldiers at Ft. Hood. U.S. intelligence intercepted emails between the imam and the Major, but the FBI decided that they didn't constitute a threat. We don't know if Abdulmuttab also communicated with al-Awlaki, but this too is something Congress should strive to find out.

One encouraging development is that the U.S. and Yemen governments are finally working together against jihadists. A series of recent raids supported by the U.S. have killed more than 50 suspected al Qaeda fighters, including suicide bombers. Al-Awlaki and the top two AQAP leaders were possibly killed in one of the strikes, though their fate is unclear.

Sending Gitmo's jihadists back to this maelstrom makes no security sense. Yemen has a weak government with mixed loyalties and its prisons are porous. Al-Awlaki himself was released in 2007, having been held at American request. Mr. Obama says we need to close Gitmo because it offends our values, but he's happy to send its detainees back to Yemen where we can target them with smart bombs when they rejoin the fight. Mr. Obama's desire to fulfill his campaign pledge to close Gitmo is an ideological fixation that risks letting killers loose to target Americans again.

More broadly, the Administration's law enforcement mentality is also part of the problem. Its instinct is to attribute every terror incident to a misguided individual—"an isolated extremist," as the President initially said of Abdulmuttalab—as if al Qaeda sympathies require a membership card and monthly meetings. Hasan and Abdulmuttalab are charged with being jihadists bent on murder who were encouraged or facilitated by other jihadists. This is the way the terror threat is evolving, with virtual recruitment over the Web of radicalized individuals from sanctuaries that change as opportunities arise.

Stopping future attacks is going to require interrogation—and before criminal charges are filed. We need to learn who gave Abdulmuttalab the PETN explosive and whether there is some al Qaeda terrormaster coordinating similar attacks the way KSM coordinated the 9/11 hijackings. Yet the White House impulse is to indict any terrorist we capture under criminal charges and let him lawyer-up. We may be lucky this time if Abdulmuttalab is singing, but that won't always be the case.

Whatever their mistakes, the Bush-Cheney policies properly identified the enemy and kept the U.S. homeland safe after 9/11. The Obama Administration needs to shed some of its campaign illusions to meet this evolving threat, and not returning Gitmo's detainees to Yemen is an essential first step.

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