

# Unanswered questions in London bombings

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Birmingham city centre was closed down Saturday night, and 20,000 people were evacuated for 10 hours. West Midlands Police put up an exclusion cordon around the A38 inner-city ring road, blocking off the city's Broad Street entertainment district and the city's Chinese quarter, an area full of pubs, theatres, restaurants, flats and hotels. Four controlled explosions were carried out on a bus on Corporation Street, but officers say the item destroyed had not posed a threat.

Birmingham city centre faced "a real and very credible threat," West Midlands Chief Constable Paul Scott Lee said. His assistant chief constable, Stuart Hyde, stressed that the police did not believe "that the incident that we are dealing with this evening is connected with the events of 7 July in London."

On Sunday morning bomb disposal experts declared that a suspect package at the Travelodge Hotel on Broad Street was not a "credible device."

This is all that is publicly known about a major security alert. The situation is not much better in regard to the London bombings last Thursday that left 49 people confirmed dead and a further 25 unaccounted for. No one knows who committed the atrocity. There are a number of unanswered questions, about which contradictory statements have been made. Factual information previously given out by authorities about the explosions themselves has turned out to be false.

The first claim of responsibility was made by a previously unknown group, the Secret Organisation Group of Al Qaeda of Jihad Organisation in Europe, on an Islamic website. This was described by Home Secretary Charles Clarke as a "serious one," while Prime Minister Tony Blair declared that the bombing had been committed in the name of Islam.

Blair's rush to attribute the bombings to Islamic terrorists was not supported by the statements at the time of London police or any other investigative agencies, or any verified evidence. Nor has any evidence been made public as of this writing to justify the prime minister's assertion. On the contrary, several officials at the time had questioned the authenticity of the claim of responsibility posted on the Internet.

A new claim for the attacks has since been made in the name of Al Qaeda by a group called the Abu Hafs al-Masri brigade. But the British Broadcasting Corporation's security correspondent, Gordon Corera, has again urged caution.

The investigation is said to be focusing on Moroccan national Mohammed al-Gerbouzi, who disappeared from his London home recently. He has been linked to terrorist attacks in Madrid and Casablanca. French and German security forces have accused al-Gerbouzi of links with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian-born figure alleged by the US and Britain to be heading Islamist insurgents in Iraq.

Morocco has requested that the British government extradite al-Gerbouzi, who has enjoyed political asylum in the UK for 16 years. He was convicted in absentia of involvement in terrorist attacks in Casablanca that killed 44 people.

The London-based Arabic language daily *Al-Hayyat* reported that British security forces raided the homes of two Muslim students at the University of London and took them into custody. It also reported that police have detained and questioned scores of Muslims, including those

holding British citizenship.

There has been an important revision in the official presentation of the actual events of the July 7 bombings in London. Scotland Yard's deputy assistant commissioner, Brian Paddick, told a press conference on Saturday, "All three bombs on the London Underground system actually exploded within seconds of each other at around 8:50 in the morning."

He said that technical data from London Underground disproved the previous reports, which placed the times of the bomb explosions further apart. Police now believe there was a team of at least four bombers using commercial high explosives with sophisticated timing devices.

On Thursday and Friday, it had been widely reported that the bomb at Liverpool Street station exploded at 8:51 a.m., the second blast came at 8:56 a.m., and the third at 9:17 a.m.. The bus explosion at Tavistock Square, south of the Euston Road, reportedly took place at 9:51 a.m.

A third controversial issue is the early report that the Israeli Embassy in London had been informed of a possible bombing prior to the first explosion.

A report published by the Associated Press (AP) at 12:16 p.m. on July 7, authored by Amy Teibel in Jerusalem, stated, "British police told the Israeli Embassy in London minutes before Thursday's explosions that they had received warnings of possible terror attacks in the city, a senior Israeli official said."

The article continued: "Israeli Finance Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had planned to attend an economic conference in a hotel over the subway stop where one of the blasts occurred, and the warning prompted him to stay in his hotel room instead, government officials said...."

"Just before the blasts, Scotland Yard called the security officer at the Israeli Embassy to say they had received warnings of possible attacks, the official said. He did not say whether British police made any link to the economic conference.

"The official spoke on condition of anonymity because of the nature of his position."

Within hours, the original Associated Press report had been removed, following denials by Israeli officials in Tel Aviv and London. But the report had already been taken up by numerous publications internationally. AP replaced its original article with another, headlined, "Israel 'Not Warned' about London Attacks."

Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom denied that the Embassy received any warnings, saying, "There was no early information about terrorist attacks." He told Israel Army radio that Netanyahu had planned to attend an Israeli corporate investment conference at the Great Eastern hotel near the Liverpool Street subway station, but "after the first explosion our finance minister received a request not to go anywhere."

Netanyahu told *World Net Daily* that reports that he received prior warning about the terror attacks "are entirely false.... When the first bomb went off, we were departing our hotel. While we were on our way out, the security people said there was an explosion near the area I was scheduled to speak. They asked us to go back and stay put in our hotel."

When he was questioned about the report on Sky News, Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair was more equivocal in his response. He said he could not comment on Israeli reports that their embassy in London

had received a warning phone call from police minutes before the blasts. “Of course, if there had been any kind of specific warnings we would have dealt with it.... We are not aware of any warning at the moment.”

The report also prompted a rebuttal by the intelligence analysis web site *Stratfor*, which has links to US intelligence and military authorities and is said to have a number of ex-CIA agents on its payroll. *Stratfor* denied the AP story, but then alleged that, in fact, Israel had given the UK prior warning of an attack on London.

*Strafor* wrote on July 7, “Contrary to original claims that Israel was warned ‘minutes before’ the first attack, unconfirmed rumours in intelligence circles indicate that the Israeli government actually warned London of the attacks ‘a couple of days’ previous. Israel has apparently given other warnings about possible attacks that turned out to be aborted operations. The British government did not want to disrupt the G8 summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, or call off visits by foreign dignitaries to London, hoping this would be another false alarm.

“The British government sat on this information for days and failed to respond. Though the Israeli government is playing along publicly, it may not stay quiet for long. This is sure to apply pressure on Blair very soon for his failure to deter this major terrorist attack.”

Also begging a credible explanation is the extraordinary decision by the British authorities to downgrade the official threat level for the country, at a time when it was hosting the G8 summit of major industrial nations.

Information on terrorism is processed by MI5’s Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC). In June, JTAC downgraded the threat level because it deemed that the risk of an attack was at its lowest point since 9/11. There are seven threat levels, and on July 7 Britain was on “substantial,” which is the fourth level behind “severe general,” “severe specific,” and “imminent.”

The only public indication that this decision had been taken came in a report in the *Financial Times* of June 7, which explained, “In an advisory note to leading businesses in recent days, the terrorist threat has been downgraded from its second highest level ‘severe general’ to a lower category of ‘substantial.’ [The *Financial Times* is apparently in error in calling “severe general” the second highest threat level.—editor].

“Under a system agreed by the security service two years ago, businesses receive written risk assessments and regular briefings on terrorist threats. These are not made public.”

No explanation was offered at that time as to why the terror threat was deemed to have receded. It had been at the higher level during May’s campaigning for the British general election.

The *Financial Times* and other newspapers have pointed out that during Britain’s bid to stage the Olympic Games, Sir Ian Blair had met with representatives of the Olympic Committee to reassure them on the danger posed by terrorism. The bidding cities also included New York, Madrid and Moscow—all of which have been recent targets of major terrorist attacks.

The *Financial Times*’s Jimmy Burns wrote on July 7, “Less than an hour before the first explosion, early morning listeners to the BBC’s Today programme heard Sir Ian Blair, the Metropolitan Police commissioner, claiming some credit for London’s successful bid to host the 2012 Olympics.

“For all London’s status as one of the key capitals and financial centres in the world—and the attractiveness of it as a prime target for any headline-grabbing terrorist act—the city’s bid was helped by Sir Ian convincing the International Olympic Committee that London remained safe and secure enough to attract visitors from around the world.”

Britain’s Olympic bid had emphasised that there had not been a major terrorist attack in London since that at Canary Wharf in February 1996. Sir Ian Blair said that the Olympics could count on the Met’s “unrivalled experience of counter-terrorism work, described recently as the envy of the policing world.”

An additional point made by Burns is that “the focus of security and policing generally had been evidently elsewhere—at the G8 summit in Scotland.”

Burns continued: “Of the 12,000-strong special force of officers created to police the summit, up to half were sent from England, with London contributing large numbers. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, senior police chiefs announced that many of the 1,500 Metropolitan Police officers were being sent back to London.”

The most innocent explanation for the lowered security threat level is incompetence combined with indifference towards the safety of the UK population.

With up to 4,000 police on duty at any one time in the environs of the summit, held outside Edinburgh, Scotland, the event was at the centre of the biggest security operation in UK history. But there was little need to set up a force of 12,000 officers, and place three security cordons around the Gleneagles Hotel, to protect the G8 heads of state and their entourage from a few hundred anarchist protesters armed with sticks and bricks.

It would seem reasonable to assume that terrorists intent on attacking the UK during the summit would find London a more inviting and realisable target than the massively fortified location of the summit itself.

The Met has 31,000 police in total, but the 1,500 sent to Edinburgh will have included many of its specialists in counter-terrorism operations. As a result, security in London may have been diluted.

As Burns also points out, a meeting of G8 justice and interior ministers in Sheffield prior to the Gleneagles summit had “agreed to develop international cooperation to protect potential vulnerable targets, among them underground and train networks.”

It is too early to draw any conclusions about the authors of the terrorist atrocity in London. Whoever they might be, or whatever their political motives, they have committed a reactionary and criminal act that can only play into the hands of the American and British governments, which have seized on the tragedy to justify their war in Iraq and the so-called “war on terrorism.”

However, the mounting inconsistencies and questions do point to one important political fact: for the imperialist governments, raising the threat of terrorism has far more to do with providing a pretext for militarism abroad and repression at home than with concern for the well-being of the broad mass of the people.

As always, terrorist attacks are viewed by the US and Britain, in particular, as opportunities to justify the war in Iraq, even though, as everyone knows, Iraq had nothing to do with Al Qaeda or 9/11, possessed no weapons of mass destruction, and posed no threat to the American or British people.



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