

Britain: outstanding questions on July 7 bombings warrant independent inquiry

Mike Ingram
6 August 2005

The July 7 terror bombings in London are being used to justify an unprecedented offensive against civil liberties, including the adoption of a shoot-to-kill policy by the police. All the more imperative that the claims of Prime Minister Tony Blair's government concerning the bombings be subjected to intense scrutiny and not be accepted on face value. Given Blair's shameless lies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, and all of the lies that have followed the invasion of Iraq, there is no reason to accept uncritically any of the statements coming from 10 Downing Street or Scotland Yard.

Only days after the bombings, Blair rejected calls for an inquiry into whether anything could have been done to prevent them, even as he was insisting that Britain faced a continuing threat and seizing on the bombings to enact measures drastically curtailing free speech rights and expanding the powers of the state to spy on the population, hold alleged terrorists and their supporters for long periods without charges, deport immigrants, close down mosques, and cordon off entire parts of major cities.

Two questions, in particular, deserve genuinely independent inquiry: Why was the threat assessment, used to estimate the likelihood of a terrorist attack, lowered just weeks prior to the bombings and kept at the reduced level during the G-8 summit of government heads of major industrial nations, which was meeting in Britain at the time of the July 7 attacks? And how much did MI5 know about the alleged bombers?

The *New York Times* reported July 19 that the decision to lower the threat level was prompted by an assessment issued by the Joint Terrorist Analysis Centre, which includes officials from Britain's main intelligence agencies, as well as police forces and customs services.

"Less than a month before the London bombings, Britain's top intelligence and law enforcement officials concluded that, 'at present there is not a group with both the current intent and the capability to attack the UK,'" the *Times* wrote.

"By reducing its assessment of the threat, British officials put the possibility of a terror attack by Islamic radicals only one level higher than the current chance of a terror attack by the Irish Republican Army, now ranked as 'moderate,'" the report continued.

There was every reason to expect greater vigilance from the UK's security services on July 7, given that the leaders of the eight most powerful nations, including among them the foremost proponents of the so-called "war on terrorism," were meeting in Scotland. But there has yet to be an explanation for why Britain's threat level was downgraded instead.

Moreover, there was cause to anticipate even the form of a potential attack. Sixteen months before, 191 people had been killed in the Madrid train bombings. And at a meeting of G8 justice and interior ministers in Sheffield just prior to the summit, it was "agreed to develop international cooperation to protect potential vulnerable targets, among them underground and train networks."

Bombers may have been known to MI5

The lowering of the threat level has been subjected to increasing criticism, as more information has become available about the backgrounds of the alleged bombers, and reports have surfaced that at least one of them had previously come to the attention of MI5.

The *Independent* newspaper, July 18, asked, "How much did the security services know about the bombers?"

The article states that "there is growing evidence that at least three of them may have been known to the security services before July 7 and that two or more of them had links to known members of al-Qa'ida."

It reports that Mohammed Sidique Khan, 30, was "scrutinised by MI5 last year after his name came up in an anti-terrorist operation but was not placed under surveillance."

The *Sunday Times* also reported that Khan was scrutinised by MI5 as part of an inquiry into an alleged plot to explode a truck bomb outside a London target. He was one of hundreds of potential suspects, but was not regarded as a threat.

The *Washington Post* noted on July 18: "One of the suspected bombers visited Israel for one day in the spring of 2003, Israeli authorities have reported." The newspaper states that "senior Israeli intelligence officials have told Israeli reporters" that "they have found no evidence that his trip was related to the subsequent April 30, 2003 suicide attack on a Tel Aviv nightclub by two British men of Pakistani origin," but this has not prevented the revelation of Khan's visit from fuelling criticism of British intelligence for not monitoring his movements.

The report of Khan's visit to Israel must be examined in light of earlier reports by the US-based Stratfor web site that the Israeli intelligence service, Mossad, had warned MI5 of a possible terror attack. Stratfor reported on July 7 that "unconfirmed rumours in intelligence circles indicate that the Israeli government actually warned London of the attacks 'a couple of days' previous."

Further questions have been raised over reports that two of the four suspects visited Pakistan, entering and leaving the country together.

AFX News reported July 21, "Two of the four London bombers visited Pakistan together in 2003 before making another trip about half a year ago, said a Pakistan intelligence officer."

"The officer, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Shahzad Tanweer and Mohammad Sidique Khan, who visited Pakistan from Nov 19, 2004 to Feb 8 this year, also came here in July 2003," the article states.

Widespread reports that a third suspect, 18-year-old Hasib Hussain, had visited Pakistan in July 2004 were said to be false after it was reported that a passport picture released by Pakistani authorities was identified as actually belonging to a 16-year-old boy of the same name, living in northwest London.

Further suspicion that MI5 knew at least some of the four suspects was

provided by a strange controversy involving Britain's Home Secretary Charles Clarke and the French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy. At a July 13 press conference, Sarkozy said he had been told at the European Union terrorism meeting convened at Britain's request following the July 7 bombings that some of the London bomb suspects were arrested last year and then released in order to break a wider network. The BBC web site quotes Sarkozy as saying "It seems that part of this team had been subject to partial arrest."

Clarke immediately denied that any such conversation had taken place, either in private or in the full meeting.

"Mr. Sarkozy was inaccurate, shall I put it gently, in suggesting that there had been a discussion of this kind because there was not," *Reuters* quotes Clarke.

"There is absolutely no foundation in them," Clarke continued. "I'm sorry to be so blunt, but that is the state of affairs."

The French minister stuck by his remarks for the entire day, before a French government spokesman finally issued a different story. He said that Sarkozy had not been quoting Clarke and that he had not been referring to any of the four suspected bombers, but to other members of a network to which they belonged.

Reports from the *Independent* and other news sources give weight to Sarkozy's version of events. Even if he had not been told of the arrests and releases by Clarke, his remarks still give cause for concern. If the four were part of a network that was under surveillance, how could they themselves have been unknown, as has so far been claimed?

Though the evidence against the four is as yet circumstantial, it is certainly enough to have warranted close scrutiny and surveillance, particularly in light of related issues already raised by the *World Socialist Web Site*. (See "Unanswered questions in London bombings")

Questions over source of explosives

Contradictory reports have emerged as to the source and nature of the explosives used in the London terror bombings.

A report from *Al Jazeera* July 16 said that European investigators believed the "material used in the bombs was similar to the kind made for military use or for highly technical commercial purposes, such as dynamite used for precision explosions to demolish buildings or in mining."

According to *Al Jazeera*, "British intelligence officials asked their European counterparts to scour military stockpiles and commercial sites for missing explosives" citing "three top European-based intelligence officials."

This version was widely publicised in the immediate aftermath of the July 7 bombings and used to infer that such high-grade explosives must have been coordinated by Al Qaeda.

Raids on the houses of three of the suspects from Leeds, however, were said to have found traces of triacetone triperoxide or TATP, the base ingredients of which—drain cleaner, bleach and acetone—can be bought easily without attracting any suspicion.

In an article posted July 15, *Times Online* pointed out, "Instructions for making TATP can be found relatively quickly on the Internet."

This did not prevent British authorities insisting that a "fifth man" must have been involved in the July 7 attacks and the search for the "chemist" led them to Egypt.

The arrest of Magdy Mahmoud Mustafa el-Nashar

Egyptian biochemist Magdy Mahmoud Mustafa el-Nashar was arrested following a police raid on his flat in Leeds, the keys to which he was said to have given to one of the suspected bombers before leaving for Egypt 10 days before the bombings. The flat was said to contain traces of the explosive TATP in a bathtub.

El-Nashar, 33, had studied for a semester at North Carolina State University and was working as a graduate student at the University of Leeds before he departed for a holiday in his home country. He has consistently denied any connection with the bombings, pointing out that his belongings remained in Leeds and he has a return ticket dated August 10. He is also said to have been offered a job at a pharmaceutical company, which was to begin upon his return to Britain.

Egypt refused to hand el-Nashar over to Britain and the two countries have no extradition treaty. British investigators travelled to Egypt to observe questioning.

According to a *New York Times* report of July 31, "a Scotland Yard official" said el-Nashar was "no longer an active part" of the police investigation. "The police might still want to talk to him as a witness, the official added," the *Times* reports. Nevertheless el-Nashar is believed to be still in custody.

The case of Haroon Rashid Aswat

Another key suspect as a possible "fifth man" was named as Haroon Rashid Aswat, an Indian-born British citizen wanted by the US on sealed terrorism charges.

According to a *New York Times* article July 29, "Several weeks before the July 7 bombings in London, British officials were reluctant to approve a plan by United States authorities to seize an Indian-born British citizen who is now wanted for questioning in the attacks, law enforcement officials said yesterday."

The *Times* reports that 31-year-old Aswat, who was originally from West Yorkshire, where one of the suspected suicide bombers lived, had been under surveillance by South African authorities. Citing "American officials," speaking on condition of anonymity, the newspaper claims that during discussions between South Africa, the US and Britain about how to proceed against Mr. Aswat, "he eluded investigators and disappeared."

Aswat was arrested by Zambian authorities after coming under scrutiny following the July 7 bombings, the *Times* reports. He is said to be an aide to Egyptian cleric Abu Hamza al Masri, who preached at the north London mosque in Finsbury Park prior to his arrest. Masri is being held pending extradition to the US.

Aswat first came to the attention of US counterterrorism investigators in 2002 in Seattle, but the authorities believed he had been killed fighting American troops in Afghanistan. The *Times* reports that South African authorities had informed New York federal authorities that Aswat was alive just weeks before the London bombings, prompting the US to "file the sealed criminal complaint charging him with providing material support to Al Qaeda."

The *Times* notes: "British authorities, during the discussions with United States and South African officials, were unimpressed with the American case, one of the officials said."

However, Aswat was named by British authorities as a possible suspect who may have provided logistical support for the coordinated attacks.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported July 24 that "federal investigators said they did not locate Haroon Rashid Aswat, a British Muslim of Indian descent, even after they agreed to give his alleged collaborator in Seattle a light prison sentence in the hope that the man would lead them to him.

"Justice Department officials in Washington said Sunday that the Seattle

man, Earnest James Ujaama, had been extremely helpful in putting together an indictment against another London Muslim, Egyptian cleric Abu Hamza al Masri, but that he had not led them directly to Aswat.

“Had they found Aswat, officials conceded, it might have prevented the deadly London attacks on three subway trains and a bus that killed 52 people, plus the four suicide bombers. Investigators in Britain believe that Aswat had perhaps as many as 20 cell phone conversations with some of the London suicide bombers.”

The *Seattle Times* published reports that unnamed former federal officials had said Washington had blocked Aswat’s indictment in Seattle.

In its July 24 edition, the *Seattle Times* writes that “long before he surfaced as a suspect [in the London bombings] there, federal prosecutors in Seattle wanted to seek a grand-jury indictment for his involvement in a failed attempt to set up a terrorist-training camp in Bly, Ore., in late 1999. In early 2000, Aswat lived for a couple of months in central Seattle at the Dar-us-Salaam mosque.”

The newspaper adds, “As law-enforcement officials in Seattle prepared to take that case to a federal grand jury here, they had hoped to indict Aswat, Ujaama, Abu Hamza and another associate, according to former and current law-enforcement officials with knowledge of the case.

“But that plan was rejected by higher-level officials at Justice Department headquarters, who wanted most of the case to be handled by the US Attorney’s Office in New York City, according to sources involved with the case.” The newspaper adds that “Justice Department supervisors in Washington, DC gave the Seattle office the go-ahead to seek an indictment against Ujaama only.”

The above-cited *New York Times* report of July 31 also states, citing as its source a British security official, that investigators had decided, “For now, this man or any role he may have does not figure, to any degree of importance, in our inquiry.”

The newspaper also states that initial reports that Aswat had made 20 calls to the suicide bombers in Britain were not true. “Investigators also found that calls had been made from his cell phone to West Yorkshire, where three of the July 7 bombers lived. But investigators said they now had determined that no calls were to the bombers,” the article states.

The need for an independent inquiry

It is not possible to determine how much is really known about the perpetrators of the terror attacks in London. But the uncertainty itself is playing a pernicious political role. Reports of an illusive “fifth man” and possible links to international terror organisations are used to stoke up panic and fear and implement a virtual state of siege within the capital.

A serious inquiry, which would have to be entirely independent of the British and American governments, would not only ask the obvious questions about the lowering of the terror threat level and the failure of MI5 to place suspects under surveillance, but would also probe the underlying causes of the bombings and their foundation in the Blair government’s participation in Washington’s illegal onslaught against Iraq.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact