Britain: Book alleges US sent MI5 detailed file on London bomber Khan

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On June 19, the *Times* of London published excerpts from a new book that raise further questions regarding the role of the British intelligence agencies in last year's terrorist bombings in London. According to American journalist Ron Suskind's book *The One Percent Doctrine*, one of the suicide bombers, Mohammad Sidique Khan, was refused entry into the United States on security grounds two years before the London attacks. US authorities allegedly sent Britain's MI5 a detailed file on the suspected terrorist following the incident.

These claims contradict the official account of the London bombings as presented in the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee's (ISC) report released last month. The report concluded that while Khan was known to British intelligence agencies, it was "understandable" that he was not a priority for MI5 because he was considered to be a peripheral figure and not a serious threat to Britain. Eliza Manningham-Buller, the director-general of MI5, testified that Khan had never before been listed as a terrorist threat.

A very different picture of the events leading up to the London bombings is presented in Suskind's book. *The One Percent Doctrine*, subtitled "Deep inside America's pursuit of its enemies since 9/11," is based on Suskind's interviews with sources in Washington and the American intelligence establishment. Suskind was a *Wall Street Journal* reporter from 1993 to 2000, and in 2004 wrote *The Price of Loyalty*, which detailed former Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill's exposures of the Bush administration.

According to Suskind, Mohammad Sidique Khan became known to American authorities by 2003, after the National Security Agency (NSA) intercepted e-mails and telephone calls between Khan and another suspected terrorist living in the US, Ahmed Omar Abu Ali. The e-mails reportedly included discussions about blowing up synagogues in the US. Ali has since been sentenced to 30 years imprisonment for plotting to assassinate President George W. Bush.

When it became known that Khan was going to enter the US, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) pressed the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to organise an extensive surveillance operation while he was in the country. After what Suskind describes as "tense exchanges that went all the way to top bosses in Washington," the FBI decided that the threat of Khan evading their surveillance and launching an attack in the US was too great. He was then placed on a "no-fly list" and refused entry on board a flight from Heathrow airport to New York in March 2003.

"This is a very dangerous character," senior FBI agent Dan Coleman reportedly told colleagues. "We and the Brits should be all over this guy. But we have to do it right. Unless we have some coordinated effort between us and the CIA to handle him—arrest him on some charges that'll stick or work close, coordinated surveillance on him and the people he's in contact with over when he comes—we just can't take the risk."

"British intelligence was certainly told about Khan in March and April 2003," Suskind told the *Times*. "This was a significant set of contacts that Khan had, and ones of much less importance were exchanged on a daily basis between the CIA and MI5. British authorities were sent a very detailed file."

Officials in London immediately denied Suskind's entire report. The day after the *Times* published the excerpt from *The One Percent Doctrine*, intelligence officials provided a rebuttal to the *Guardian*. According to these unnamed officials, Suskind has confused Mohammad Sidique Khan with Mohammad Ajmal Khan, who has been jailed for nine years for assisting Lashkar-i-Toiba, a Kashmir-based Islamist organisation.

The *Guardian* reported that Mohammad Ajmal Khan fits the profile of the man described in Suskind's book. His communications to the US were intercepted by the NSA, he has been linked to Ahmed Omar Abu Ali in a terrorist trial in the US, and he discussed attacking synagogues while visiting the US. The newspaper also claimed that there is no evidence that Mohammad Sidique Khan had previously been to America, or that he was known to the FBI or CIA.

Suskind has adamantly defended the accuracy of his report. "In my investigation and in my book and in my

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conversations with people in the US government, there was no mistake or doubt that we are talking about Mohammed Sidique Khan, not Mohammed Ajmal Khan," he told the *Telegraph*. Suskind suggested that British officials were trying to divert attention away from their role in the affair. "There has been no misidentification," he insisted.

Given the absence of any additional information, it is not possible at this stage to determine the veracity of Suskind's report. But there is every reason to question the British authorities' denial that they were forewarned of Khan's intentions by the CIA.

There has still been no attempt to disprove an earlier report that British officials were provided with a specific and detailed warning of a pending terrorist attack months before the July bombings. In August of last year, the *Observer* revealed that in early 2005 Saudi intelligence had advised British officials that four Islamic militants, including at least some British citizens, were planning to bomb the London Underground within the next six months. The newspaper quoted high-level Saudi officials, including security officials and the Saudi ambassador to Britain. The *Observer* published another story last February that cited senior US National Security Council counterterrorism agents confirming the report.

The Intelligence and Security Committee's report into the London bombings merely denied that any foreign intelligence agency had issued a prior warning of the attack. The ISC dismissed the Saudi tip-off as irrelevant, saying that it presented a different scenario from that which took place on July 7, but provided no further details on the intelligence.

Nor did the ISC even mention other reports that suggested that the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad had also warned London of a pending attack. On July 7, 2005, the Stratfor web site, which has contacts within the US intelligence agencies, reported that "unconfirmed rumours in intelligence circles indicate that the Israeli government actually warned London of the attacks 'a couple of days' previous" to the bombings.

The ISC also provided no satisfactory explanation for the decision to downgrade the national security alert in March 2005 despite the pending G8 summit in Scotland, which saw a massive security mobilisation.

If Suskind's account of events is accurate, there was *at best* an "intelligence failure" that amounts to gross negligence on the part of the British authorities. This would also then have been followed by a cover-up to protect the guilty parties.

Given the American journalist's presentation, however, another scenario and explanation for a possible coverup is possible, namely that elements within the security apparatus permitted the terrorist attacks to take place. If the FBI and CIA had produced a detailed file on Khan and his international connections and had refused him entry into the US out of fear that he would perpetrate a terror attack on American soil, how can one explain MI5's failure to monitor the suspected terrorist for more than two years before the London bombings?

The British police and intelligence agencies have long track records of provocations and dirty tricks. Moreover, the London bombings were seized upon by the Blair government to further its agenda. The terrorist attacks were used to pass further repressive and anti-democratic "anti-terror" laws and to justify Britain's participation in the US-led occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Despite the explosive character of Suskind's allegations, Tony Blair's Labour government has again refused to consider a public inquiry into the events leading up to the London bombings. "The [Intelligence and Security] Committee's conclusion is that there was not an intelligence failure," a spokesman for the prime minister insisted. The government maintains that another inquiry would be a "diversion" from the "war on terror."

On the same day as the *Times* published the excerpts from Suskind's book, it ran an editorial, "Better intelligence: fostering public trust is the answer to conspiracy theories," notable for its concern over public scepticism regarding the official "war on terror."

The *Times* bemoaned the "growing, and regrettable, tendency to reject all official explanations of horrific, headline-making events and see instead plots, conspiracies and cover-ups."

The newspaper conceded that a "swift, independent assessment" of the London bombings may be necessary, but demanded that people accept the official version of events as presented by the government. "Inevitably there is much that will remain confidential and that we have to take on trust. We are paying people to be secretive, and so secretive they will inevitably be."

On the contrary, the character of the British government and intelligence agencies' response to the London bombings as well as the unanswered questions surrounding the events leading up to the terrorist attacks demands that not a single aspect of the official explanation should be taken on trust.

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