

# An officially induced panic: UK terror scare sparks wave of mini-scares

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More than a week after the US and UK announcements that an alleged terror plot to blow up commercial airliners flying from Britain to the US had been foiled, the official claims are unraveling. Authorities have been unable to provide any concrete evidence to back up the story that police raids and mass arrests in Britain thwarted an imminent attack that would have taken the lives of thousands of transatlantic travelers.

Significant details, in fact, have come to light that indicate the opposite. Not only has it been revealed that no bombs were actually in the process of being assembled, but none of the suspects—British-born Muslims, who at this point remain in custody without having been charged—had purchased airline tickets. Some did not even hold passports.

It is becoming increasingly evident that the government-media hysteria about the alleged plot was prompted not by security concerns, but rather by a politically motivated desire to divert attention from the growing crisis of both the Bush and Blair governments. Under conditions of a deepening military and political debacle in Iraq, growing domestic opposition to the war, a deteriorating military situation in Afghanistan, and the unfavorable outcome for the US and Britain in Lebanon, the eruption of the latest alleged terror plot has served to “change the subject,” while fostering an atmosphere of fear and panic that both governments hope will disorient the public and facilitate new attacks on democratic rights.

It is now clear that there was no imminent attack to be thwarted. But the massive provocation unleashed by Washington and London has succeeded in creating a climate of near-hysteria, at least within official circles, the media, the airline industry, and police agencies, that has spawned a string of incidents in which minor occurrences were sensationalized and reported, replete with wild claims and lurid rumors, as new “terror events.”

Under other circumstances, most if not all of these occurrences would have been handled in a routine manner. In the current climate, they became news items of national and international significance—until, by the next news cycle, the dire allegations had proved baseless.

These cases follow a common pattern: allegations are leveled by the authorities; the media swings into action to uncritically promote and embellish the official line. In short order, the initial claims are abandoned and the stories drop out of the headlines, with no accounting for the initial false reports, while the media waits with bated breath for the next “terror threat.”

New incidents are being reported with such frequency that it is difficult to keep up with them. The most recent was a bomb scare Friday aboard a charter flight from London’s Gatwick Airport headed

for Hurghada, Egypt.

Police reported that a passenger had found a note in a seat pocket saying a bomb was on the aircraft. The note prompted the pilot to order an emergency landing, and the 767 jet was escorted by an Italian fighter jet to Brindisi airport in Italy. Fire engines surrounded the plane upon landing, and the passengers were disembarked. After a search of the plane turned up nothing, airport officials stood down the emergency.

A day earlier, a flight from London’s Heathrow Airport headed for Washington, DC, was diverted to Boston after a woman’s strange behavior and altercations with the flight crew prompted the pilot to order an emergency landing.

Local television stations and national cable networks interrupted regular programming for live coverage of the incident, as Air Force F15 jets escorted the plane to an emergency landing at Logan Airport, where authorities interrogated passengers and police dogs sniffed through luggage for explosives. None were found.

Some early reports on the passenger, Catherine Mayo, a 59-year-old woman from Vermont, claimed she had a suspicious note in a foreign language, and might somehow have a connection to Al Qaeda. It was also reported she was in possession of a six-inch screwdriver. Reference to the screwdriver was subsequently dropped. According to the FBI, it turned out that the potential Al Qaeda link was a vague reference Mayo had made to “being with people associated with ‘two words.’ ”

Later Thursday, it was being reported that the woman had not posed a threat and was most likely suffering from claustrophobia or a panic attack. US Attorney Michael J. Sullivan said in a statement: “At this time, there is no evidence that this was a terrorist-related incident.”

Mayo was arrested and charged with interference with flight crew members and flight attendants by intimidation, and held overnight. In convicted, she faces up to 20 years’ imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine.

In another incident on Thursday, a terminal at the Tri-State Airport in West Virginia was shut down for 10 hours after two bottles containing liquids in a woman’s hand luggage reportedly tested positive for explosives residue at a security checkpoint. Airline service was suspended, and about 100 passengers and airport employees were ordered to leave the terminal.

A machine used by Transportation Security Administration (TSA) screeners to test for explosives registered positive on the bottles, and a canine team also registered a “positive hit.” But chemical tests later that day found no explosives in the bottles, one of which contained a gel-type facial cleanser. The TSA screening procedure tests for a range of explosives residue, some of which are found in common

household items.

The woman, a 28-year-old of Pakistani descent, was taken from the airport by federal authorities at 5 p.m. No charges have been filed against her.

In another bomb-scare incident, a half-mile perimeter was set up around a container terminal in Seattle, Washington, on Wednesday after it was reported that bomb-sniffing dogs' reactions had indicated that at least one container recently unloaded from a ship could contain explosives. Dozens of personnel were evacuated.

The US Customs and Border Protection Service said that an X-ray machine subsequently "revealed 'anomalies' in two containers from Pakistan," although when they scanned the containers with radiation detection equipment, no radioactive material was found.

A supposed threat of terrorist attack from individuals purchasing pre-paid cell phones in bulk was the impetus for several arrests and investigations in the past week. In February and March, the FBI and the Department of Homeland Security sent out joint bulletins alerting local police departments around the US that the profits from the resale of these untraceable phones could be used to finance terrorist organizations—or that the devices themselves could be used as detonators to trigger explosive attacks.

Two cell phone incidents in the Midwest made national news this past week. On August 11, three Texas men of Palestinian descent were arrested in Michigan after attempting to buy 80 cell phones in separate purchases of three at a time. Adham Abdelhamid Othman, 21, Maruan Awad Muhareb, 18, and Louai Abdelhamied Othman, 23, were arrested outside a Wal-Mart in Caro, Michigan, about 80 miles north of Detroit, after store employees became suspicious and notified police.

A search found that one of the men had images of the Mackinac Bridge—which links Michigan's upper and lower peninsulas—on a digital camera. From this, local authorities surmised that they were plotting to target the bridge with an explosive blast. The arrests sparked increased security on the 5-mile-long bridge, with the Coast Guard stepping up its patrols.

Prosecutors charged the men with collecting or providing materials for terrorist acts and surveillance of a vulnerable target for terrorist purposes—felonies with a 20-year maximum penalty. The three were each jailed on \$750,000 cash bond, and held for nearly five days on the terrorism charges in Tuscola County jail.

The men told a magistrate the day after their arrest that they had bought the cell phones for resale, and that they had taken the photos of the bridge—along with snapshots of local wildlife and lakes—as tourists. By Monday, the FBI's Detroit office had issued a news release saying the agency had no information indicating that the men had any "direct nexus to terrorism."

On Wednesday, Tuscola County Prosecutor Mark Reene asked for the state terrorism charges to be dismissed so the men could be turned over to federal authorities. The three appeared in a US District Court in Bay City, Michigan, on Thursday and were charged with federal fraud conspiracy and money laundering—charges unrelated to terrorism.

Similar cell-phone terror charges fizzled out in nearby Ohio on Monday. Dearborn, Michigan, residents Osama Sabhi Abulhassan and Ali Houssaiky, both 20, were arrested August 8 in Marietta, Ohio, when police found dozens of pre-paid cell phones in their car, along with \$11,000 in cash. A store clerk had phoned police after the two men purchased a large number of cell phones.

Initial reports on the arrests indicated passenger lists and an airport

security guide were also found. (As it turns out, Houssaiky's mother works for Royal Jordanian Airlines and had left an outdated passenger list in the car, along with the guide.) The two were charged with soliciting or providing for an act of terrorism, money laundering and a misdemeanor charge of lying to police about what they were doing with the phones. Police claimed the men gave two accounts of why they purchased the phones.

As in the alleged threat to blow up the Mackinac Bridge, Michigan news broadcasts warned of the local terrorist connection. Media coverage took a particularly vile form in a blog by Debbie Schlusel, a local radio talk show host and occasional guest on Fox News's "O'Reilly Factor."

In a blog entry titled "All-American Terrorist: How Dearbornistan Boys went from Football Field to Islamic Terror," Schlusel wrote that the two men arrested in Ohio, former students at Fordson High School in Dearborn, came from the "most Muslim-populated high school in America" and suggested that any student from Fordson should be considered "a terrorist in training."

But the charges against Abulhassan and Houssaiky were dropped on Monday, when Ohio authorities said there was insufficient evidence to prosecute them. They were released on Tuesday after spending a week behind bars, jailed separately from other inmates. Intent on pursuing whatever charges they can, Washington County Prosecutor James Schneider said his office will continue to press the misdemeanor charge.

In yet another cell phone case, police in Tucson, Arizona, have been searching for two men of Middle Eastern descent for allegedly trying to buy around 50 disposable cell phones at a local Sam's Club store. Authorities claim the men are wanted for questioning, but not criminal charges.

Arizona's Counter-Terrorism Information Center has advised local police departments that there is a possible increase in suspicious purchases of pre-paid cell phones, although they admit that purchasing them in such large numbers makes it unlikely that they were being purchased to detonate a bomb, as much smaller quantities—easily available without bulk purchase—would be required.

Nonetheless, KVOA television reported on the dragnet atmosphere, as police responded to a tip that two Middle Eastern men were buying a large number of cell phones at discount stores in Huachuca City, Arizona, south of Tucson:

"Huachuca City police swung into action. They set up surveillance at the Dollar General and the Family Dollar stores.

"They soon spotted the black Ford Explorer with a California license plate, the vehicle the caller told police about.

"Three people—a woman, and two men with Middle Eastern names—were detained, questioned, and later released by federal agents."

Again, nothing to substantiate any terrorist activity connected to the cell-phone purchases.



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