

# On eve of London bombings: MPs told Britain faced no imminent threat

Julie Hyland  
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On January 6, the *Guardian* revealed that less than 24 hours before the July 7, 2005, suicide bombings in London, the head of Britain's security service MI5 had assured senior members of Parliament the country faced no imminent threat from terrorist attack.

Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller made her remarks to a private meeting of a dozen or so Labour MPs at the House of Commons early on July 6. According to the newspaper, so reassured were those present that they felt "confident, on leaving the meeting, that they could brief fellow MPs that the security situation was under control."

It continues that they "are said to have been deeply alarmed by the following day's events," when four men—Mohammad Sidique Khan, Shehzad Tanweer, Germaine Lindsay and Hasib Hussain—exploded suicide bombs on the London transport network, leaving 52 people dead and 700 injured.

The newspaper notes that details of the meeting had come to light just "weeks before details are expected to be made public of an MI5 operation which saw two of the July 7 bombers kept under surveillance, but not arrested."

In the immediate aftermath of the bombings, then-Home Secretary Charles Clarke had said the attacks came "out of the blue" and that the four bombers were "clean skins" with no known links to terrorism.

Despite claims that Britain had been informed of an imminent attack on London by leading members of the Saudi Arabian government and intelligence authorities, ministers and MI5 officials insisted there had been no indication that a terror attack was being planned.

Within months, these assertions had begun to unravel. MI5 was forced to admit that Khan and Tanweer had both been placed under surveillance in connection with other individuals under investigation for potential terrorist activities. Both had also been observed in Pakistan, and MI5 had Khan and Lindsay's telephone number.

Still, the security services and government maintained

that the failure to pursue the four bombers was accidental. Only last May, reports by the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) and another by Home Secretary John Reid maintained that it was the unfortunate result of a number of "security failures" whose primary cause was "lack of resources."

The ISC claimed that the bombers' actions could not have been predicted, even whilst documenting the fact that Khan and Tanweer were known to the security services for up to two years before the attacks and that the pair had been seen in Pakistan, where it was "likely that they had some contact with Al Qaeda figures."

Prime Minister Tony Blair has continued to refuse a public inquiry into the bombings on the spurious grounds that such an investigation would be a divert resources from the "war on terror."

Information to be released over the next weeks is expected to show that at least several of the July bombers were far more central to police anti-terror investigations than previously revealed.

According to the *Daily Mail*, "Intelligence sources say the men were first seen in early 2004, nearly 18 months before the suicide attacks in London, which left 52 people dead on three Underground lines and a bus.

"On one occasion, Khan was monitored driving his car with suspects in it and on another was recorded talking to them about training for  *jihad* ."

An earlier report by the *Sunday Times* had claimed that "detectives probing the blasts had found a device in Mohammad Sidique Khan's silver Honda Accord."

The implication was that Khan was being monitored by security services—a claim denied by police.

Additionally, according to American journalist Ron Suskind, Khan was barred on security grounds from entering the US in 2004 because of his connections with Al Qaeda figures. Suskind has claimed that MI5 was presented with a detailed file on Khan by US security at

the time, reinforcing the claims made by Saudi Arabia.

The *Guardian* insinuates that Manningham-Buller's retirement will be the occasion for further potentially destabilising revelations over the extent of MI5's "failures." And on the face of it, details of her statement to MPs would tend to confirm accounts of MI5 incompetence.

One of the most striking features of events surrounding the July 7 bombings was that, only months before, the decision had been taken to downgrade the national security alert from grade three "severe-general" to grade two "substantial." This was despite the fact that—at the very time the bombers struck the capital—leading heads of state were meeting in Scotland for the G8 summit.

For years—and particularly since the Madrid train bombings of 2004—these meetings have been accompanied by martial law-type security, with entire areas sealed off, and no-fly zones in place. With Spain—then one of President George W. Bush's key allies over the Iraq war—already having been targeted, Britain was considered to be a prime target.

Indeed, ever since 2001, Blair and leading government ministers and the police and security officials have repeatedly made this claim. Just months before the July 7 bombings, Parliament had finally approved a new Prevention of Terror Bill that overturned long-standing democratic rights, including the legal principle of presumption of innocence, using this threat as justification.

In order to pass its highly contentious measures—Blair himself described them as a "watershed" in legal history—the government and the security services issued dire warnings of the inevitability of a terror attack on British soil. The security services web site at the time shrilled that "both British and foreign nationals belonging to Al Qaeda cells and associated networks are currently active throughout the UK, that they are supporting the activities of terrorist groups, and that in some cases they are engaged in planning, or attempting to carry out, terrorist attacks."

Yet a few weeks later, the security threat was downgraded and Manningham-Buller was apparently soothing MPs that there was no evidence of an imminent terrorist assault.

If this catalogue of apparent security failures was attributed to "incompetence," it would nevertheless demonstrate that the actions of the government and security services in the period leading up to July 7 were politically criminal. Rather than a rigorous and unflagging

struggle to protect the British people, the powers-that-be were engaged in a propaganda hoax whose objective was to utilise the "war on terror" to justify military war abroad and an unprecedented assault on civil liberties.

In November—just prior to announcing her retirement—Manningham-Buller was again raising the political temperature. In a heavily trailed speech, the MI5 chief claimed that the security services were aware of 30 "Priority 1" ongoing "mass casualty" terror plots in Britain and knew of some 1,600 people who were actively engaged in, or facilitating, terrorist plots, either in Britain or abroad.

In her remarks, which won front-page headlines for days, she continued that young Muslims were "being groomed to be suicide bombers." There is no way of verifying Manningham-Buller's assertions, but they fed a vociferous anti-Islamic campaign being stoked up by the government and the media in order to divert from the disastrous consequences of the illegal invasion of Iraq.

However, the repeated failure of the security services to move against Khan and Tawaar raises a further sinister possibility. It is highly implausible that the British security forces, with their long history of involvement in Ireland—which includes the staging of deliberate, murderous provocations—could have suffered so many monumental "lapses." For this reason, many informed commentators have suggested the possibility that the security services—or at least a section of them—were aware that an attack was imminent on July 7 and deliberately decided to "stand down" and allow them to take place, so as to clear the way for a renewed offensive against democratic rights.

At the very least, the report of Manningham-Buller's remarks to senior MPs once again underscores the need for an independent investigation into the circumstances surrounding July 7 and MI5's alleged failings.



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