

The London bombing trial: How much did the security services know?

Paul Mitchell
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Earlier this month a jury in Woolwich Crown Court found Muktar Said Ibrahim, Hussain Osman, Ramzi Mohammed, and Yassin Omar guilty of conspiracy to murder in a failed attempt to set off four bombs in London on July 21, 2005. The judge said each of them must serve at least 40 years in jail before they can be considered for parole. The jury failed to reach a verdict relating to two other defendants, Manfo Kwaku Asiedu and Adel Yahya, who now face a retrial.

The court heard how the homemade hydrogen peroxide bombs, similar to those used in London on July 7, 2005 that left 52 people dead and 700 injured, were carried by the defendants in backpacks onto three tube trains and a bus. The bombs failed to explode, emitting a “popping noise”.

Ibrahim claimed that they only intended to frighten people in a protest against the Iraq war. Omar told the court, “I hoped that this would be televised, would be shown on TV and taken seriously and that would put pressure on the government after they realised that people have gone to these lengths just to do a demonstration on Iraq.” Prosecutors argued that only the wrong formula for the explosive and “good fortune” prevented another atrocity from occurring.

During the trial it emerged that Ibrahim, the leader of the plot, had arrived from Eritrea in 1990 and was jailed in 1996 for five years for a violent mugging. In 2003 he visited Sudan for “jihad training” and boasted to friends on his return that he had used rocket-propelled grenades. In May 2004, Ibrahim encouraged Osman, Mohammed, and Omar to join him on a jihadi training camp in Britain’s Lake District.

It is at this point that the trial began to expose once again just how extensively the police and security services were monitoring the activities of Islamic extremists.

In August 2004, Ibrahim was also captured on surveillance photographs taken outside Finsbury Park mosque in London. The venue is associated with many of those who have been subsequently charged with terrorist offences. The mosque was run by the radical cleric Abu Hamza al-Masri, who is serving seven years in jail, and swarmed with intelligence agents and informants. Hamza has long relations with Britain’s security services. Former Labour Party Environment Minister Michael Meacher has asked if the security services encouraged British Islamists to fight in the former Yugoslavia—a claim aired by the

former US federal prosecutor John Loftus in 2005, who has stated that British intelligence used the al-Muhajiroun group in London for this purpose.

There are questions as to how much the intelligence services continued to protect or work directly with Abu Hamza. But there is no doubt that anyone who visited Finsbury Park mosque would be known to the police. Abu Hamza is wanted by the US for the alleged establishment of a terrorist training camp in Oregon with associate Haroon Rashid Aswat. Referring to Aswat, Loftus said, “What’s really embarrassing is that the entire British police are out chasing him, and one wing of the British government, MI6 or the British Secret Service, has been hiding him. And this has been a real source of contention between the CIA, the Justice Department, and Britain.... [H]e is a double agent.”

Despite this surveillance, in September 2004 Ibrahim was granted a British passport. Within a month, he was charged with a public order offence in London after an argument with a policeman who questioned him about the literature he was handing out. Ibrahim jumped bail and headed for Heathrow airport in December 2004, followed by ten MI5 undercover agents. The taxi in which he was travelling was driven by Rauf Mohammed, an Iraqi who was suspected of working with Syrian-born Mohammed al-Ghabra to help British Muslims travel to Iraq to fight against the US-led occupation. Al-Ghabra, who protests his innocence and remains at liberty in London, had had his bank accounts frozen by US Treasury officials who claim he was someone “who provides material and logistical support to Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organisations”.

Ibrahim and his two companions were stopped by Special Branch officers who found thousands of pounds in cash, a military first-aid kit and manual, with passages on the treatment of gunshot wounds heavily annotated, and a ballistics manual. Police said they did not have enough evidence then to prevent him from completing his journey. Razwan Majid and Shakeel Ismail, who travelled with Ibrahim, have not been seen since and their families have reported them missing.

It was not until documents were leaked in early 2006 by disaffected MI5 officers demanding an inquiry into “missed evidence” (to put pressure on ministers to provide more resources for the intelligence agencies) that it became known

that Ibrahim was then followed to Pakistan. It has been suggested that whilst in Pakistan Ibrahim may have met at least two of those involved in the July 7 bombings: Mohammed Sidique Khan and Shahzad Tanweer, who are known to have been there at the same time.

Khan and Tanweer had been watched by MI5 for almost 18 months before the attacks. MI5 officers had followed Khan and photographed him on at least four occasions and made inquiries about a telephone registered in his name. Tanweer had been identified on three occasions. They had come to the attention of the security services as a result of the investigation, Operation Crevice, into those subsequently arrested for planning to blow up nightclubs or shopping centres with fertiliser bombs in 2004.

In February that year, Khan and Tanweer were followed for 15 hours while they were in turn following a car driven by Omar Khyam, the leader of the fertiliser bombers. On March 23, Khan and Tanweer were again filmed alongside Khyam, only a week before he was arrested. In a recorded conversation, Khyam and Khan discussed purchasing one-way tickets to Pakistan. Khyam urged Khan, "because you're going to leave now, you may as well rip the country apart economically as well. All the brothers are running scams. All the brothers that are leaving are doing it." He added that within two weeks of landing in Pakistan, Khan would be "at the front". Khyam also told Khan that "next month, they're going to start raiding big time all over the UK".

MI5 also failed to send unnamed photographs of Khan and Tanweer to the United States to be viewed by one of the fertiliser bomb plotters, Mohammed Junaid Babar, who had turned informer after being arrested by the FBI. Babar subsequently identified Khan as someone he had trained with at an Al Qaeda camp in Pakistan in 2003, together with other fertiliser bomb plotters.

When Ibrahim returned to the UK, six months later in March 2005, police did not stop him, even though they were alerted about his return and he was the subject of an arrest warrant for jumping bail. This failure is made all the more extraordinary, given that Madrid had witnessed the terrible atrocity at Atocha railway station in March 2004 that left 191 people dead. A May 2006 Intelligence and Security Committee report into the July 7 attack warned the intelligence services of the possibility of terrorists engaging "in unseen operational activity despite even intensive investigative efforts".

The same report suggests "the existence of the 'home-grown' threat had been well understood in advance of July 2005". British nationals accused of terrorist activity included shoe-bombers Richard Reid and Saajid Badat, both in jail for plotting to blow up aircraft in 2001; Andrew Rowe serving 15 years for terrorist offences in 2003; Dhiren Barot, arrested in 2004 for planning a "dirty bomb" attack in Britain and sentenced to 30 years in jail; and most members of the "Operation Crevice" plot who were convicted earlier this year to life imprisonment.

If official accounts are to be believed, then every trial that has so far taken place relating to terror plots, successful or failed, has painted an ever more damning picture of incompetence on the part of the security services. But given the record of MI5 and MI6, and the role provocations have historically played in Britain's policy in Ireland and elsewhere, it is entirely possible that the London bombings of both July 7 and July 21 were allowed to take place so as to provide the government with a pretext for further attacks on civil liberties and new military adventures overseas.

The usual defence offered by the security services for their repeated failure to follow leads and arrest those under surveillance who later turned out to be major figures in various terror plots is to claim that resources were over-stretched and those deemed to be "peripheral" figures (such as Khan and Tanweer) were not prioritised. At the time of the fertiliser bomb plot and the July 7 and July 21 plots a year later, estimates were cited of up to 1,200 people involved in or sympathetic to terrorist cells. More recent claims cite figures of 2,000 active terrorists in 219 suspected terror networks under watch in Britain, along with a similar number of sympathisers.

It is impossible to verify or disprove such reports. But there is no doubt that the government's interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq have made Britain a prime target for terrorist acts and helped recruit significant numbers of disoriented young men to Islamic fundamentalist groups.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the actual situation revealed in the three major terror trials or investigations carried out so far is of a far smaller number of people involved in plotting terrorist acts. Many knew each other personally or at least travelled in the same circles and to the same places, particularly Finsbury Park Mosque. And a significant number of these individuals had been under sustained surveillance by the security services, without action being taken that would have prevented a terrible loss of life.



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