

Saudi king alleges UK could have prevented July 7 bombings

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King Abdullah's accusation that the UK failed to act on Saudi intelligence that could have prevented the July 7, 2005, London bombings has met with vigorous denials from the Brown government. Fifty-two people were killed in the attack.

The king's allegations were made on the eve of his visit to London to begin a five-country tour of Europe. In advance of this first state visit by a Saudi monarch to the UK in 20 years, the king gave a rare interview to the BBC, during which he complained that many countries, "including, unfortunately, Great Britain," were not treating global terrorism "seriously."

"We have sent information to Great Britain before the terrorist attacks in Britain but unfortunately no action was taken. And it may have been able to maybe avert the tragedy," he said.

The British government had been prepared to court all manner of controversy over the king's visit. Notwithstanding the kingdom's well-publicised human rights abuses and the stench of corruption surrounding the Al Yamamah arms contract between Britain's BAE systems and Saudi Arabia—a Serious Fraud Office inquiry into which was quashed by former Prime Minister Tony Blair—the visit was accorded full ceremonial honours.

On the matter of what the British authorities knew of a potential terrorist plot in advance of the July bomb blasts, however, the powers-that-be were decidedly uneasy.

The government rejected the king's claims. A Home Office spokesman said that information provided by the Saudis "was materially different from what actually occurred on 7 July and clearly not relevant to those acts."

"We have made it clear that if we had intelligence that could have prevented the attacks we would have acted upon it," the spokesman added.

A spokesman for Prime Minister Gordon Brown said, "We made it very clear at the time that no specific warnings were received from any source. We do have a very close intelligence relationship with the Saudis. We just happen to disagree on this point."

The British media was at one with Downing Street in its denials.

Writing in the *Guardian*, Richard Norton-Taylor said the monarch's accusations were intended as a "welcome distraction" from his "country's record in exporting Islamist extremism."

"Fifteen of the suicide bombers in the September 11, 2001, attacks on the US were Saudis," he noted, continuing that the claims also diverted "from the claims of bribery and corruption" surrounding UK/Saudi arms deals.

Robert Fisk, for the *Independent*, said that the king's claim that

the July 7 bombings could have been prevented if Saudi intelligence had been taken seriously was "frankly incredible," recounting how "Saudi Arabia's role in the 9/11 attacks has still not been fully explored."

Michael Evans in the *Times* said the Saudi intelligence "was full of holes." Having been checked out by the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC), "None of the experts considered the Saudi intelligence had sufficient merit or credibility to sound the alarm, let alone to persuade JTAC to recommend a raising of the terrorist alert."

Whatever the king's reasons for making his public accusation, such categorical refutations of its veracity are at odds with the evidence.

It is a matter of record that the Saudi authorities *did* pass on intelligence to the UK prior to the London bombings.

The *Observer* first reported the exchange in August 2005, one month after the explosions. After months of British denials, in February 2006, the *Observer* cited White House sources confirming specific reports of a bomb plot on the UK capital from Saudi intelligence.

A 2006 investigation into security issues surrounding the bombings by the parliamentary Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) finally acknowledged that intelligence from Saudi Arabia had been received, but it "was examined by the agencies who concluded that the plan was not credible."

The ISC gave no further information on this intelligence. Nor did it make any mention of additional warnings of potential terrorist attacks. On the day of the blasts, the US web site Stratfor reported, "unconfirmed rumours in intelligence circles indicate that the Israeli government actually warned London of the attacks 'a couple of days' previous'" to the bombings.

Though the *Times's* Evans, repeating the ISC, states that the Saudi intelligence was "full of holes," details of it have never been made public.

In his BBC interview, the king refused to elaborate on the intelligence supplied, saying that it "may cause sensitivities" between the two countries. According to the Associated Press, however, in the months prior to the July attacks, the Saudis informed the British and US governments that they had arrested a man who confessed to raising money for terror attacks in London.

Although no names were supplied, the intelligence specified that several of the attackers would be British citizens. The Associated Press report continued that the information "gleaned from the

suspect after he was captured returning to Saudi Arabia was detailed enough to heighten British concerns about the possibility of an attack around July 2005 in crowded sections of London.”

The *Observer*’s February 2006 article also reported the Saudi information as stating an imminent attack would involve four Islamic militants, some of whom would be British citizens, who could target the London Underground.

On July 7, four British citizens, Mohammed Siddique Khan, Shazad Tanweer, Hasib Hussein and Jermaine Lindsay, detonated suicide belts on the London Underground and a bus.

In addition to the Saudi intelligence, it is now known that the security services had been tracking two of the bombers for at least two years prior to the attack.

The ISC findings reported that on two separate occasions, both Khan and Tanweer had been placed under surveillance for potential terrorist involvement by MI5. The pair had also been observed in Pakistan, where it was “likely that they had some contact with al-Qaeda figures,” the report stated. MI5 even had Khan’s telephone number as a contact of a terror suspect and also the phone number of Lindsay.

(Earlier this year, it was revealed that MI5 had recorded meetings between Khan and Tanweer on four occasions in 2004 with Omar Khyam, one of five men jailed for life in May for the so-called “fertiliser bomb” conspiracy.)

Nonetheless, the ISC fully exonerated the security services, maintaining that it was “understandable” that they had decided not to pursue a more detailed investigation, and that the actions of the four bombers could not have been predicted.

This raises another fundamental question. As cited, in his *Times* article Evans claimed that the Saudi intelligence was not considered of sufficient merit to recommend raising the “terrorist alert.”

The point, however, is that not only was the alert *not* raised, it was actually *lowered* less than one month before the bombings from “severe general” to “substantial.”

The ISC said that this was “not unreasonable,” and that the reduction was “unlikely” to have affected the chances of preventing the attacks.

It is this claim that is truly without merit or credibility.

This was at a time when Britain was implementing a massive security operation as it hosted the 2005 G8 conference. Just as preparations were under way to mobilise thousands of police officers to guard the leaders of the major powers—including President George W. Bush and Blair, the architects of the Iraq war—reports were coming in from foreign intelligence agencies of an imminent attack in the capital.

And yet the British authorities chose to lower the security alert?

For all the reassurances, there are just too many unanswered questions as to July 7, not least as to whether some or another faction of the ruling elite allowed an attack to take place in order to serve their own political agenda. Despite it being the largest ever terror assault on British soil, the government has continuously refused a public inquiry—forcing survivors and relatives of the victims of the bombings to seek a judicial review into its decision.

Although King Abdullah’s remarks were an embarrassment for the British government, every effort will be made to ensure

relations are not damaged, and that any further unwelcome revelations are not forthcoming.

This was underscored by Foreign Office Minister Kim Howells’s statement that the two states should unite around their “shared values.” No matter that the Foreign Office’s own country profile on Saudi Arabia states that “Women are subject to discrimination. Prisoners suffer maltreatment and torture. Capital punishment is imposed without adequate safeguards, and often executed in a cruel way and in public. Amputations are imposed as corporal punishment. Shiite citizens suffer discrimination. We also have concerns about freedom of expression, assembly and religion.”

Human rights campaigners have pointed out that the monarch’s red carpet treatment makes a mockery of the government’s supposed crusade for human rights, on which basis the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were launched.

Most commentary has concentrated on the economic self-interest at the heart of such duplicity. Saudi Arabia is Britain’s largest export market in the region—worth £73.5 billion annually—while British financial ventures, which include HSBC, Shell and BAE Systems, are estimated at £7 billion. The king is reportedly to officially sign a contract for BAE to supply 72 Eurofighters to Saudi Arabia during this tour.

There is an additional, related factor in Saudi/UK relations.

Only last week, Washington unilaterally imposed economic sanctions on Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps, as it stepped up its preparations for a military assault on Tehran.

Thus far, the British government has made little comment, other than to endorse the US action. Reports indicate, however, that Prime Minister Gordon Brown has assured the Bush administration of British support in the event of an US attack.

Similarly, the BBC noted that “one of the Saudis’ prime concerns today is how to contain their giant neighbour Iran.”

A reliable US ally, the Saudi regime is one of the sponsors of the upcoming Maryland summit on Israeli/Palestinian relations, which several political commentators have suggested Washington intends to utilise to sign up other Middle Eastern regimes behind an imminent strike on Iran.

The BBC reported that “So sensitive is this issue [Iranian containment] that King Abdullah declined to discuss it” during his interview. Behind closed doors, however, there will be no such restrictions on this latest war conspiracy.



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