London 7/7 bombing investigation a “whitewash”

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Families of victims of the July 7, 2005 bombings in London have denounced a parliamentary investigation into the events as a “whitewash”. They accuse Parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC), which issued a report of its investigation last week, of covering up the failure of MI5 to stop the four suicide-bombers who killed 52 people and injured 700.

Sean Cassidy whose son Ciaran died on the London underground, said, “This is a complete whitewash. We now need a public inquiry. It is the only thing that will answer all the questions. It has to be independent. We are four years on and there are still no answers.”

Robert Webb, whose sister Laura died, said, “The ISC report seemed to give the benefit of the doubt to MI5 in a way the Hutton Report or the Butler Inquiry did to MI6 over Iraq... I feel I owe it to Laura to get some answers... We need a fair independent inquiry that asks robust questions of MI5 and the police into why decisions were made and looks at wider questions of why these men did what they did.”

Rachel North, who survived the July 7 bombings, accused MI5 of using “weasel words” over what they knew, adding, “It does look a lot like MI5 ran rings around the MPs” who sit on the ISC.

In the aftermath of the July 7 bombings, then Home Secretary Charles Clarke said the attacks came “out of the blue” and the four bombers—Mohammad Siddique Khan, Shehzad Tanweer, Germaine Lindsay and Hasib Hussain—were “clean skins” with no known links to terrorism. Ministers and senior security officials insisted there was no warning of an imminent attack.

The ISC report confirms that, in reality, there was a wealth of information about the bombers, particularly Khan. “As we have delved deeper,” it declares, “we have uncovered new information that even the organisations involved had not connected together.” In relation to Khan the report reveals:

* He was cautioned by West Yorkshire Police for assault in 1993, a police record created and his photograph taken.

* In 2001, several months before the September 11 bombings in New York, Khan was one of 40 men filmed by West Yorkshire Police surveillance officers at a suspected terrorist training camp in Yorkshire, although he remained unidentified.

* In late March 2003, MI5 received intelligence that Mohammed Quayam Khan, from Luton, was the leader of an “Al-Qaida facilitation network”, which provided financial and logistical support to the organisation. MI5 launched an investigation called Operation Crevice, about which it informed the ISC.

* In April 2003, Siddique Khan was seen driving a car carrying an extremist suspect connected to another investigation.

* In July 2003, Quayam Khan’s mobile phone was found to contain the number of Siddique Khan’s phone, which was registered to an Islamist bookshop in Leeds.

* In January 2004, MI5 received intelligence that another individual in the network, Omar Khyam, was involved in an active bomb plot. Khyam became MI5’s “top priority” and Operation Crevice developed into “the largest operation they had ever run”. Khyam was under “consistent” surveillance and everyone he met and spoke to was “assessed”.

* On February 2, 2004, Khan met Khyam near Crawley and was followed and photographed on his way back to Leeds.

* On February 20, 2004, the same day that 600 kilograms of fertiliser was discovered in a warehouse, electronics expert Mohammed Momin Khawaja arrived from Canada to give advice to the Crevice group on remote detonation devices. The following day Khan attended a “farewell” meal with the group and Khawaja.

* On three occasions between February 28 and March 23, 2004 Khan drove to Crawley to meet Khyam and was heard talking about financial fraud, the “success of the Madrid bombings” and returning to “jihad” in Pakistan. Despite being followed home again on one occasion to Leeds, Khan still remained unidentified and classified as a “desirable” target for MI5 investigation (Khyam was classified as “essential”). MI5 told the ISC that they could easily have identified Khan, but did not because he was considered a “small-time fraudster” who had “minor contact” with the Crevice plotters.

* At the end of March 2004, Khyam and seven others in the Crevice group were arrested on suspicion of involvement in the fertiliser plot, tried and found guilty in April 2007.

* In May 2004, a detainee revealed that a man named “Ibrahim” had travelled to Pakistan in 2003 and met the future Crevice group

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members there.

* In June-July 2004, ten “extremely sensitive” emails are exchanged between West Yorkshire Police and MI5 about Khan and other Crevice contacts in the Leeds area. One of the emails was nine pages long and contained Khan’s 1993 photograph.

* On July 14, 2004, a check on the Police National Computer showed that there had been 21 enquiries about Khan’s car since August 2003.

* On February 9, 2005, Khan’s car was put on the Automatic Number Plate Recognition system so that CCTV cameras around the country could track it.

* On April 12, 2005, following confirmation from another source that “Ibrahim” had been in Pakistan, MI5 launched Operation DO*** (the full name is redacted in the ISC report) to identify him. It was not until after the 7/7 bombings that Ibrahim was discovered to be Khan. Recent evidence suggests a fifth man was involved and remains at large.

Faced with these facts, the MPs on the ISC had no option but to express their astonishment. Their report declares, “even though Siddique/Sidique/Sadique Khan was not assessed to be significant it is nevertheless surprising, given the amount of information MI5 and the police had on him, that they said they had not identified Mohammed Siddique Khan prior to 7/7.”

However, the report concludes, “We cannot criticise the judgments made by MI5 and the police based on the information that they had and their priorities at the time.”

Throughout its 102 pages, the report strives to excuse the failure of the police and security services to identify the July 7 bombers by referring to “missed opportunities,” only made clear with the benefit of hindsight. It claims the different ways Siddique was spelt hampered the investigation!

The report also claims MI5 was hampered by lack of resources. MI5’s undisclosed budget has tripled since 2001 and the annual bill for all intelligence related activity stands at £2.5 billion a year.

The report brands as “astounding” the revelation that MI5 had been able to investigate only one in 20 terror suspects in 2004 and that 54 “essential” targets were not even being watched. The ISC states, “They had to prioritise even within this essential group. Therefore a “desirable” target did not even get close to attracting a share of the limited resources available.” The ISC report makes the outlandish statement that *several hundred thousand* MI5 officers would be needed to meet all eventualities, as opposed to the current 3,500.

The report also claims MI5 was overwhelmed by the vast amount of information it had to deal with, citing the tens of thousands of phone calls monitored between January and March 2004, of which 4,020 were connected to Operation Crevice.

Many of the key facts that would give a better assessment of Khan’s importance are redacted in the report on the grounds of national security. These include the number of networks being investigated, the number of people “housed” (followed back to their homes), or numbers travelling to Pakistan to attend terrorist training camps. More extraordinary is the revelation that the record of the targets deemed “essential” and “desirable” in 2004 is “no longer available” following update of MI5’s IT system.

Also redacted from the report are all details about specific warnings that Saudi Arabian intelligence had passed on to British and US intelligence in December 2004 about a terror plot by British-born Muslims, aimed at the London Underground or a nightclub. The ISC says it received no reply for requests for further information made to the Saudi Embassy or the French Embassy about statements made by the then French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy. He said he had been told at the European Union terrorism meeting following the London bombings that some of the suspects were arrested in 2004 and then released in order to break a wider network.

The above facts are sufficient to justify a public inquiry into the UK’s worst mainland terrorist atrocity. The necessity is compounded by the recent not guilty verdict handed down to three men accused of helping to plan the July 7 bombings. After nearly four years and despite a massive police investigation costing some £100 million, they remain the only people to have faced any charges in relation to the London bombings.

Above all, the July 7 terror bombings in London were used to justify an unprecedented offensive against civil liberties, including the adoption of a shoot-to-kill policy by the police that claimed the life of innocent Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes. Only days after the bombings, Prime Minister Tony Blair rejected calls for a public inquiry, insisting that Britain faced a continuing threat. He seized on the bombings to bring in measures to drastically curtail free speech rights and expand the powers of the state to spy on the population. Powers were enacted to hold alleged terrorists and their supporters for long periods without charges, deport immigrants, close down mosques, and cordon off entire parts of major cities. New regional MI5 offices and regional police Counter-Terrorism Units were set up.

It is not possible to determine how much was and is really known about the perpetrators of the terror attacks in London, but a full inquiry is necessary. Such an investigation has to be entirely independent of the British government and probe the underlying causes of the bombings and their foundation in the Blair government’s participation in Washington’s illegal war against Iraq.

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