

# Transatlantic airline plot: The case that “couldn’t be allowed to fail”

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Three men have finally been found guilty of the 2006 transatlantic airline terror plot, which it was claimed at the time threatened imminent mass carnage.

It has taken three years, two trials, and the largest ever counter-terrorism investigation in British history at the cost of £40 million to convict anyone for the plot, which caused panic and mayhem at airports internationally.

The second trial was, according to Sean O’Neill in the *Times* of London, “the court case that could not be allowed to fail”.

These efforts testify to the immense political capital invested in obtaining a guilty verdict. From the timing of its apparent discovery, the airline plot has been pursued not so much as a criminal matter, much less as a means of ensuring the safety of the travelling public, but as an essential propaganda tool in London and Washington’s “war on terror”.

On August 10, 2006, British authorities announced they had narrowly averted suicide bombings of a number of planes flying from London’s Heathrow Airport to North America. In the early hours of that morning, 25 young men, mainly British citizens of Pakistani origin, were arrested.

According to Metropolitan Police Deputy Commissioner Paul Stephenson, the intention had been to smuggle explosives, disguised as soft drinks, on board the aircraft and detonate them mid-flight, causing “untold death and destruction and...mass murder”.

As US homeland security secretary, Michael Chertoff claimed that the plot had been “close to execution phase,” Heathrow was closed down, flights cancelled and security restrictions imposed on hand luggage, which continue to this day.

Long before the first trial in April 2008, there were already numerous inconsistencies apparent in such claims. Of the original 25 arrests, only eight people were charged in connection with the airline plot—Ahmed Abdullah Ali, Assad Sarwar, Tanvir Hussain, Oliver Savant, Arafat Khan, Waheed Zaman, Umar Islam and Mohammed Gulzar.

The jurors in the first trial were shown “martyrdom videos” made by several of the accused. They also heard details of MI5’s counter-surveillance operation in the months leading up to the arrests, including covertly placing a camera and microphone in the alleged “bomb making factory”.

That some incident had been intended was clear. But there was little evidence to back up the charge of a conspiracy to explode transatlantic aircraft. No bombs had been assembled, no plane tickets purchased, and some of those alleged to be potential suicide bombers did not have passports.

The question also remained: why, when such a major terrorist atrocity was deemed to be on the horizon, had British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the head of Britain’s anti-terror unit proceeded with their summer vacations?

In the 2008 trial, the defendants denied plans to explode aircraft, claiming that they only intended to mount a publicity stunt to express their opposition to Western intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This was rejected by the jury, who found three of the accused guilty of conspiracy to murder but could reach no agreement on their involvement in a plan to blow up airplanes, nor even if such a plan existed. Mohammed Gulzar, who was described by the prosecution as the ringleader of the conspiracy, was acquitted of all charges.

Immediately, the Crown Prosecution Service announced that having failed to get the result it wanted first time, it would mount a retrial.

Media commentators have congratulated the prosecution on success the second time around. This time the evidence and arguments were more convincingly presented, they have stated.

The second trial was also presented with e-mails which—despite innocuous sounding references to purchasing aftershaves and plans for vacations—the prosecution argued were coded messages outlining the bomb plot. Due to a ban on the use of intercept material in British courts, the e-mails had not been available during the first trial, but this was

circumvented by a court order in the US requiring Yahoo! to disclose them.

The order is a sign of the importance attached to convictions in Washington. British security services have long blamed the failure to secure guilty verdicts in 2008 on being prematurely “bounced” by American pressure into making arrests before they had successfully built a case.

This is in reference to the arrest of British citizen Rashid Rauf in Pakistan, who is portrayed as a key Al Qaeda mastermind. It was his sudden seizure, British security sources claim, that brought forward the London raids before news got out.

Andy Hayman, former assistant commissioner of Specialist Operations in the Metropolitan Police, reiterated this claim on Tuesday, writing in the *Times* on the outcome of the second trial. Detailing months of intensive surveillance against those accused, he wrote, “We logged every item they bought, we sifted every piece of rubbish they threw away (at their homes or in litterbins). We filmed and listened to them; we broke into their homes and cars to plant bugs and searched their luggage when they passed through airports.”

Briefings were being exchanged between the US and Britain over the surveillance, Hayman writes. “So certain were we that we were in control and had the suspects under observation 24/7 that my top team and I agreed that we could each, one at a time, take a holiday.”

Hayman himself left for his vacation in Spain. Four days into it, however, he received news that Pakistani intelligence had arrested Rauf.

“We believed the Americans had demanded the arrest, and we were angry we had not been informed”, Hayman continued. “We were being forced to take action, to arrest a number of suspects, which normally would have required days of planning and briefing. I needed to get back to London and had a very small window in which I could travel before things went crazy at the airports. Once news of the plot was out, the airline authorities would have to introduce strict security measures to plug the loopholes that might have allowed these men to smuggle explosives on to aircraft”.

In truth, the alleged transatlantic plot was seized on by the criminal clique in the White House to shore up their “war on terror”, which was producing a bloody quagmire in Iraq and Afghanistan and threatened an electoral debacle for the Republicans in the November 2006 elections.

Writing in the *Guardian* in September 2008 on the failure of the first trial, Simon Jenkins noted, “It has been an open secret in police circles that Operation Overt, the most complex in counter-terror history, was sabotaged by the American vice president, Dick Cheney, desperate for a

headline boost to the Republicans’ 2006 mid-term elections”.

For its part, the Blair government was just as eager to utilise the terror plot for similar objectives—particularly in pressing for the extension of anti-terror powers so that people could be detained without charge for 90 days.

It is these cynical political calculations that lie behind the two trials.

The second jury found Hussain, Sarwar and Ali guilty of “conspiracy to murder involving liquid bombs”. Four others were found not guilty and an eighth, Umar Islam, found guilty of conspiracy to commit murder.

Despite this less than resounding outcome, Washington and London have expressed satisfaction. The Obama administration welcomed the verdict, with Mike Hammer, a National Security Council spokesman, extending “thanks to the British government for seeing these efforts through to today’s conclusion”.

British Home Secretary Alan Johnson said he was “pleased that the jury has recognised that there was a plot to bomb transatlantic flights”, and stated that it had reaffirmed “that we face a real and serious threat from terrorism”.

News reports spoke of “anxiety” and “relief” in London and Washington attending the verdicts. The *Times* opined that a second failure to convict would have dealt a “catastrophic blow” to the “credibility of the Government and the security services” and their anti-terror measures.

The real concern of the ruling elite in London and Washington is that their own conspiracy, against the lives and democratic rights of millions across the globe, must not be exposed.

The US, with British backing, is poised for a massive extension of the brutal occupation of Afghanistan, and the simultaneous interventions into Pakistan. The rising death toll, and the openly fraudulent character of the recent election in Afghanistan is leading to increasing public opposition.



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