

UK: Westminster “terror incident” remains unclear

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Police have been granted additional time to question Salih Khater, a 29-year-old British national of Sudanese origin, held on suspicion of terror offences after he drove into three cyclists outside Parliament Tuesday morning. Details around the incident remain unclear.

Even though Khater was arrested for attempted murder, the authorities are not yet able to confirm that the incident was a terrorist attack. As of Friday, Khater has not yet been charged with any offence.

This did not stop the media printing lurid headlines the following morning, like the *Times*: “Terror returns to Westminster.”

From what has been made public, Khater drove from his home in Birmingham to London on Monday night in a silver Ford Fiesta. He drove around the Tottenham Court Road area between 1:25 a.m. and 5:55 a.m., before moving down to Whitehall and Westminster. Police say he drove around this area for the next 90 minutes.

CCTV footage from just after 7:30 a.m. shows Khater driving around Parliament Square. He slowed down as an ambulance passed him closely on the right, employing sirens and flashing lights. Immediately afterwards Khater took a sudden left turn, across a central reservation, striking several cyclists and pedestrians. Three people were injured, none seriously.

Khater drove down an access route to the Houses of Parliament and crashed into a security barrier. Armed police descended on the car and arrested Khater, who said nothing. No weapons or explosives were found.

Detained initially on suspicion of preparing an act of terrorism, he was then arrested on suspicion of attempted murder. Police were granted a warrant of further detention for questioning, with Khater said to be not cooperating with their enquiries.

Police say Khater was not known to UK intelligence agencies. However, everything said by the authorities around the case should be approached with the necessary caution—given that in every case of terrorism carried out so far in the UK, as in other countries, the perpetrators have been well known to the state.

Questions remain about the incident itself. CCTV footage reveals an unmarked white van in the close vicinity which was apparently following Khater. The van changed direction to follow his car when he crossed the central reservation, raising the possibility that Khater was already under surveillance.

The security services denied any connection, but a retired police officer told the *Daily Mail* that the “consensus” among former officers was that this was “likely an unmarked police vehicle.”

Scotland Yard have said there was an unmarked vehicle in the area on “unrelated matters.”

Khater and his family are Zaghawa Muslims, who fled from Darfur to eastern Sudan following the 2007 humanitarian catastrophe. Abubakr Ibrahim, a Sudanese community leader in Birmingham who knows the family, explained that Khater “wanted to leave Sudan because of the country’s economic problems.”

In 2008, he walked across the desert to Libya, where he worked on a farm for two years before going to Italy and France, then coming to Britain around eight years ago with his younger brother, Mohammed.

In Birmingham, Salih Khater studied English and took a college science diploma. He had started an accountancy degree at Coventry University last September but was asked to leave after failing his first year.

Eight years after he first claimed asylum, Khater was finally issued his British passport just two weeks ago.

He has not seen his family in the Sudan. His father and sister died there last year.

Sections of the press have speculated that the incident was a reconnaissance exercise for a future attack. Friends and acquaintances in Birmingham, however, say Khater went to London to obtain a visa so he could visit relatives in Sudan.

Anwar Mukhtar runs a football team for Sudanese migrants in Birmingham, which Khater joined when he arrived. Mukhtar pointed out that having a passport “allow[ed] him to travel in and out of the country for the first time since he arrived as a refugee.” Friends say he was driving overnight to arrive early at the embassy and find a parking space.

Dismissing the idea that Khater would have staged a terrorist attack, Mukhtar told press that he “missed his family and was looking forward to seeing them, so ... it makes no sense.”

Mukhtar and other friends have suggested that Khater panicked at the proximity of the ambulance and lost control of his car. Tiredness after driving all night has also been suggested as a possible contributing factor.

Khater was widely described as a quiet and sociable man, who spent his time in cafés and playing football. He did not attend mosque. A trustee of Birmingham Central Mosque says Khater was not known as “a fervent worshipper,” noting that “He’s not the kind of person we usually see committing these kinds of crimes. They’re usually loners and keep themselves to themselves.”

This has not prevented the press drawing connections with Khalid Masood’s attack on Westminster Bridge last year, although the incidents were different.

Masood, who was known to the security services, was armed, and had driven deliberately at pedestrians before he was shot by police. The *Daily Mail* wrote that Salih Khater had moved in April to a council block “just ten minutes” from Masood’s former home.

The incident will be used to intensify policing powers and surveillance across the capital. Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick said that security in the area, including both “armed officers ... and physical barriers” had been increased lately, “and there is more to come on that in further months.” Decisions on pedestrianisation will be discussed “between parliamentary authorities, [the police], the intelligence agencies and indeed the local authorities,” including

Labour Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan.

The *Sun* demanded in an editorial that increasing state surveillance, including monitoring of social media, were necessitated by the events. “The Government must not let terrorism slip to the back of the queue, no matter how thorny other political issues are. It remains a clear and present danger.”

Press coverage of the incident is already being used to justify further Islamophobia. Windows were smashed with catapults at two Birmingham mosques on Wednesday evening. Earlier that day, responding to coverage of Khater’s case, Birmingham Central Mosque trustee Nassar Mahmood warned that such incidents led people to “speculate and... apportion blame very quickly,” making Muslims “the bogeyman in society.”

The author also recommends:

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[2 August 2018]



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