

Inquiry hears that Manchester Arena bomber was on radar of UK intelligence for seven years

Margot Miller
6 October 2020

Suicide bomber Salman Abedi, responsible for the Manchester Arena bombing, came to the attention of MI5, Britain's domestic intelligence agency, as many as 18 times before he perpetrated his horrific crime, the inquiry into the atrocity heard.

On May 22, 2017, Abedi blew himself up with a home-made bomb in the foyer of the arena, as fans were leaving the concert hall after watching a performance by Ariana Grande. The blast killed 22 and injured 600 adults and 340 children.

During the inquiry MI5 acknowledged a "missed opportunity" to stop, search and question Abedi after he landed at Manchester Airport only days before the attack, because they failed to flag him up with counter-terrorism airport police.

The inquiry was set up by Home Secretary Priti Patel and opened on September 7 at Manchester's Magistrates Court, a mile from the site of the atrocity. It is expected to run until spring. It follows the trial earlier this year of Abedi's brother and accomplice Hashem, after which he was sentenced to 55 years in jail for his part in the crime. Hashem Abedi was extradited from Libya to stand trial in Britain. During the trial, Abedi gave no evidence and revealed nothing about the attack.

The Inquiry's proceedings began with counsel Paul Greaney QC reading the names of the 22 who died in the bombing. "What happened that night was the most devastating terrorist attack in the UK for many years," he said. "The inquiry will leave no stone unturned." Inquiry chairman, retired judge Sir John Saunders echoed this, saying "this is an exercise in establishing the truth".

All fine words, but they seek to conceal the fact that the inquiry was set up as an alternative to holding inquests into the deaths, as a means to placate the anger of bereaved victims' families and survivors. It was not established to reveal the truth and the circumstances that resulted in the terrorist murders but to hide the murky dealings of MI5 and

British foreign policy, which made them possible.

As coroner of the initial Manchester Arena inquest, Saunders ruled inquests could not proceed after Counter Terrorism Police indicated material relating to the bombing was classified and closed to public scrutiny. His decision followed "public interest immunity" (PII) applications from Patel and Counter Terrorism Police North West.

In the Inquiry, evidence considered sensitive is being heard during closed sessions, excluding the public and media.

The survivors, many of whom received life-changing injuries, have been denied the right to attend the inquiry as "core participants", unlike the police and government representatives.

Despite this, evidence is being heard which confirms the fact that the attack and deaths and injuries of nearly 1,000 people were entirely preventable. That so many opportunities to prevent the crime were missed or ignored by MI5 points to one conclusion: Given the extensive surveillance of the Abedi brothers by the intelligence agencies, the crime could have been foiled in the planning stage, thus preventing the subsequent terrible loss of life.

Security expert Colonel Richard Latham told the inquiry the risk of a terrorist attack at the venue was "crystal clear", considering the UK terror threat level at the time was severe.

Greaney told the inquiry "experts consider that on 22 May there were missed opportunities to identify Salman Abedi as a threat and take mitigating action".

The inquiry heard of various examples of failures on the part of security staff to confront Abedi after his suspicious activity was noticed by several people at the venue, prior to the bombing. While this was the case, it was the failure of the intelligence agencies in the previous *months and years* that allowed the brothers to plan and ultimately carry out their heinous crime unhindered.

The inquiry heard evidence given by MI5 that they first noticed Abedi on December 30, 2010, after he was linked to

a “subject of interest” they were following. Over the next years, his associations with six more “subjects of interest were flagged up”.

Abedi became a “subject of interest” himself in 2014, but for four months only. MI5 told the inquiry Abedi was deemed so low a risk he was not even referred to the government’s Prevent counter terrorism strategy, which receives thousands of referrals.

In February 2017, counter terrorism police were aware of telephone discussions between Abedi relating to “martyrdom, including the martyrdom of a senior al-Qaeda figure” with an al Qaeda supporter. MI5 conceded British-Libyan national Abdalraouf Abdallah, jailed in 2016 for helping organising travel to Syria and Libya, “may have had some radicalising influence” on Abedi. MI5 also had intelligence of Abedi’s sympathy for Islamic State and his plans to go to Syria and Libya.

In the months before the bombing, Abedi visited Abdallah in prison.

Greaney said MI5 twice received intelligence about Abedi just months before the bombing, “the significance of which was not fully appreciated at the time”.

Without detailing this information, he said “In retrospect,” it could “be seen to be highly relevant to the planned attack”.

On May 8, 2017, British intelligence arranged a meeting scheduled for May 31 on the basis that Abedi warranted further investigation, the inquiry heard. In the intervening period, Abedi returned from Libya and bombed the Arena.

A fuller investigation into Abedi’s links to the security services will be heard in closed session, to the consternation of the victims’ families and survivors.

This is being concealed because while Salman Abedi detonated the bomb, helped by his brother, ultimate responsibility lies with the British ruling class and their intelligence agencies. The act of terror at the Arena was a by-product of UK foreign policy in the Middle East, and the victims, collateral damage.

The Abedis were protected assets of British intelligence, given free rein to travel back and forth between the UK and Syria and Libya.

When the war began in 2011, the Conservative government of David Cameron joined US and French efforts to topple Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. They allowed members of the Al Qaeda-linked Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) to travel to Libya from Britain in 2011. Abedi’s parents were both LIFG members, as were other anti-Gaddafi Libyans in his neighbourhood in south Manchester. Those who previously had control orders restricting their movements—during a thaw in UK-Libyan relations—had the orders lifted as London swung against Gaddafi.

The British-born Abedi brothers were regular visitors to Libya, where their parents had returned in 2016. Their father, Ramadan and sons are understood to have fought with Islamist forces against as proxy forces of US and British imperialism in the savage regime change operation.

British intelligence, like everyone else, knew what Abedi’s family were doing—with their Manchester group at the centre of operations funnelling rebel fighters into Libya. As a former anti-Gaddafi fighter told the Middle East Eye, “The majority who went from here [the UK] were from Manchester.”

As the war intensified in 2014, Salman and Hashem Abedi fled with British government assistance onboard the UK Royal Navy vessel, HMS Enterprise, as revealed by the *Daily Mail* in 2018.

The *Mail* reported, “The information [on the soldiers’ lists of who boarded HMS Enterprise] was subsequently passed on to Number Ten [Downing Street], the Foreign Office and the Home Office.” The intimate connection of the Abedis to the intelligence services this indicates was reported on this occasion by the media, but no further investigation followed.

Though informed by the FBI just five months prior to the Arena bombing that Salman Abedi was planning a terrorist attack, he was still not flagged by British intelligence as a terrorist threat.

In November 2018, parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee (ISC) issued a whitewash report in the Arena bombing stating “there were a number of failures in the handling of Salman Abedi’s case and, while it is impossible to say whether these would have prevented the devastating attack on 22 May, ... as a result of the failings, potential opportunities to prevent it were missed.” MI5 stated they “moved too slowly” and made mistakes.

Whatever emerges from this inquiry—just like in previous inquiries organised by Britain’s ruling elite following a mass loss of life—there will be no justice for the victims, bereaved and survivors.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact