

# Manchester Arena bombing inquiry report focuses on secondary issues to conceal security service involvement

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**20 June 2021**

Publication of part one of the report of the inquiry into the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing has demonstrated its fraudulent character.

On May 22, 2017, 22-year-old Salman Abedi blew himself up with a homemade bomb in the foyer of the arena, as fans were leaving a performance by Ariana Grande. The blast killed 22 and injured 600 adults and 340 children. Ten of those murdered were aged under 20, including an eight-year-old girl. Abedi, of Libyan descent, planned the attack with his brother Hashem.

The inquiry follows a well-worn pattern in which such public investigations as the Hillsborough and Grenfell Tower inquiries promise justice only to deny it. Headed by Sir John Saunders, the first volume of the inquiry's report, published 17 June, starts with the least significant and contentious of issues, security arrangements on the night, focusing on local shortcomings. The second part will look at the emergency response to the bombing, and whether any of the 22 victims might have been saved.

Only then will the final part discuss Abedi's radicalisation and whether the security services could have prevented him from carrying out the attack.

There is already substantial evidence in the public arena that the security services had long-term knowledge of Abedi and his family as Islamist insurgents, and had treated him as a protected asset. In this light the inquiry's main purpose is to obscure the essential fact that the carnage inflicted on May 22, 2017 was blowback for British imperialism's warmongering and destabilisation in the Middle East.

This first part of Saunders' report criticises the British Transport Police (BTP), arena operator SMG, and SMG's contracted security provider Showsec. Saunders insists that Salman Abedi "should have been identified ... as a threat by those responsible for the security of the Arena."

SMG and Showsec are condemned for their failure "to take steps to improve security at the arena" and accused of "inadequate" risk assessments and "significant failure" in counter-terrorism training for stewards. Saunders also notes the absence of any BTP officer from the foyer, and the lack of any "satisfactory explanation" for this. Much of the media attention

was on a two-hour break to buy kebabs by two on-duty officers.

There were undeniably many shortcomings and failures in the arena's security systems and training, as you would expect of corporations seeking to maximise profits and minimise costs. Showsec was, for example, criticised for not ensuring proper safety checks of the mezzanine where Abedi hid. Abedi hid in a CCTV blindspot that was known about for years.

The "most striking missed opportunity" to stop Abedi is pinned on two security guards, Mohammed Agha and Kyle Lawler, for failing to react "robustly and effectively" when a visitor raised suspicions of Abedi.

This is particularly appalling. At the time, Agha was 19 and paid £7.90 an hour. Lawler, 18, earned £4.24 an hour. Agha's job was to stand by a fire exit. He had no radio. He told the inquiry that if he left his post, except for an emergency, he might lose his job.

In the end, nothing is identified that would have prevented Abedi from carrying out his crime. If safety and surveillance on the mezzanine had been better, the attack might only have been "disrupted or deterred or fewer people killed." If Agha and Lawler had acted more "robustly and effectively", Saunders admits that it is "likely" the bomber "would still have detonated his device..." The bomber would still have killed as many people as was humanly possible, likely including the two security guards.

Very little will come out of this. The improvements recommended would place a statutory burden of responsibility on venues, under threat of financial penalties. But so far SMG, Showsec and the BTP have merely made the obligatory apologies and commitments to learn.

More fundamentally the report's narrow focus on the minutiae of events that night obscures the fundamental issue: The Abedi brothers should have been arrested long before Salman entered the Manchester Arena foyer, while the crime was still at the planning stage.

Covering over the role of the security services has been the primary objective of the British ruling class from day one. The initial inquests into the deaths were suspended after Counter Terrorism Police advised Saunders, the coroner, that related

material was classified. This followed “public interest immunity” applications by Conservative Home Secretary Priti Patel and requests from Counter Terrorism Police North West that intelligence material be excluded from any inquests.

Saunders called this withheld information “relevant and central to the matters that fall to be investigated.” Therefore, “an adequate investigation, addressing fully the statutory questions ... could not be conducted within the framework of the inquests.”

On August 20, 2020, Hashem, who was arrested in Libya the day after the blast and extradited to the UK in 2019, was found guilty with his brother of the murders, one count of attempted murder and conspiracy to commit an explosion. He was sentenced to at least 55 years in prison. He gave no evidence and revealed nothing about the attacks.

After Hashem’s trial, Patel agreed to establish the Saunders inquiry, which opened on September 7. But this alternative to inquests was again not established to reveal the truth and the circumstances that resulted in the murders, but to hide the murky dealings of MI5 with the murderers. Unlike the police and government representatives, survivors were denied “core participant” status. The inquiry heard evidence from the security services, but much of this was in closed session.

What is known from the inquiry is that the brothers were given free rein to do whatever they liked. Abedi had come to the attention of MI5 *18 times* before the bombing. MI5 told the inquiry they first noticed Abedi on December 30, 2010, when he was linked to a “subject of interest” they were following. Subsequent associations with six more “subjects of interest were flagged up.”

Abedi himself became a “subject of interest” in 2014, but this was dropped four months later. He was not even referred to the government’s Prevent counter terrorism strategy, unlike thousands of others.

In 2017, counter terrorism police knew of Abedi’s telephone discussions about “martyrdom” with an Al-Qaeda supporter. MI5 admitted that Abdalraouf Abdallah, jailed in 2016 for helping organise travel to Syria and Libya, “may have had some radicalising influence” on Abedi. MI5 also knew of Abedi’s sympathies for Islamic State and his plans to travel to Syria and Libya.

MI5 twice received intelligence about Abedi ahead of the bombing, but its significance was “not fully appreciated at the time.”

Inquiry counsel Paul Greaney QC said, “In retrospect” it could “be seen to be highly relevant to the planned attack.” The FBI notified British intelligence five months before the bombing that Abedi was planning a terrorist attack. But he was not flagged as a threat.

On May 8, 2017, British intelligence scheduled another meeting on Abedi, but did not flag him to counter-terrorism airport police. He was not stopped for search or questioning when he arrived at Manchester Airport from Libya just days

before the bombing.

In fact, British intelligence, like everyone else, knew exactly what Abedi’s family were doing. All evidence points to the central conclusion that the brothers were protected assets, allowed to travel freely to Syria and Libya because it fitted government policy.

In 2011, David Cameron’s Conservative government joined US and French efforts to topple Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi. British-based members of the Al-Qaeda-linked Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) were allowed to travel to Libya. Previously, during a thaw in UK-Libya relations, the movements of LIFG members were restricted by control orders. These were lifted as London turned on Gaddafi.

Abedi’s parents, both LIFG members, returned to Libya in 2016. The brothers were regular visitors and are understood to have fought with Islamist fighters as proxy forces of US and British imperialism in the brutal regime change operation. The Manchester-based group was funnelling rebel fighters into Libya.

In 2014, the brothers were among 110 Britons, including soldiers and their families, evacuated from Libya by the Royal Navy ship HMS Enterprise and taken to Malta.

The Abedis had planned their attack on the Arena over five months, using 11 mobile phones and freely transporting components in various vehicles, despite neither brother having a driving license. The most elementary surveillance would have thwarted their plans.

A whitewash report by parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee in November 2018 nevertheless concluded “there were a number of failures in the handling” of Abedi’s case, and “potential opportunities to prevent it were missed.” It insisted, “it is impossible to say whether these would have prevented the devastating attack.”

The Saunders report is a continuation of this years-long cover-up, making minor criticisms and allowing for bouts of ritualistic breast-beating and mea culpas while the guilty within government and intelligence circles continue their schemes against the international working class and oppressed masses.



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