

Britain now faces its own blowback

Intelligence interests in Britain may thwart the July 7/7 bombings investigation

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Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Terrorism](#)

In-depth Report: [London 7/7](#)

The videotape of the suicide bomber Mohammad Sidique Khan has switched the focus of the London bombings away from the establishment view of brainwashed, murderous individuals and highlighted a starker political reality. While there can be no justification for horrific killings of this kind, they need to be understood against the ferment of the last decade radicalising Muslim youth of Pakistani origin living in Europe.

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s, the US funded large numbers of jihadists through Pakistan's secret intelligence service, the ISI. Later the US wanted to raise another jihadi corps, again using proxies, to help Bosnian Muslims fight to weaken the Serb government's hold on Yugoslavia. Those they turned to included Pakistanis in Britain.

According to a recent report by the Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation, a contingent was also sent by the Pakistani government, then led by Benazir Bhutto, at the request of the Clinton administration. This contingent was formed from the Harkat-ul-Ansar (HUA) terrorist group and trained by the ISI. The report estimates that about 200 Pakistani Muslims living in the UK went to Pakistan, trained in HUA camps and joined the HUA's contingent in Bosnia. Most significantly, this was "with the full knowledge and complicity of the British and American intelligence agencies".

As the 2002 Dutch government report on Bosnia makes clear, the US provided a green light to groups on the state department list of terrorist organisations, including the Lebanese-based Hezbollah, to operate in Bosnia - an episode that calls into question the credibility of the subsequent "war on terror".

For nearly a decade the US helped Islamist insurgents linked to Chechnya, Iran and Saudi Arabia destabilise the former Yugoslavia. The insurgents were also allowed to move further east to Kosovo. By the end of the fighting in Bosnia there were tens of thousands of Islamist insurgents in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo; many then moved west to Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

Less well known is evidence of the British government's relationship with a wider Islamist terrorist network. During an interview on Fox TV this summer, the former US federal prosecutor John Loftus reported that British intelligence had used the al-Muhajiroun group in London to recruit Islamist militants with British passports for the war against the Serbs in Kosovo. Since July Scotland Yard has been interested in an alleged member of al-Muhajiroun, Haroon Rashid Aswat, who some sources have suggested could have been behind the London bombings.

According to Loftus, Aswat was detained in Pakistan after leaving Britain, but was released after 24 hours. He was subsequently returned to Britain from Zambia, but has been detained solely for extradition to the US, not for questioning about the London bombings. Loftus claimed that Aswat is a British-backed double agent, pursued by the police but protected by MI6.

One British Muslim of Pakistani origin radicalised by the civil war in Yugoslavia was LSE-educated Omar Saeed Sheikh. He is now in jail in Pakistan under sentence of death for the killing of the US journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002 – although many (including Pearl's widow and the US authorities) doubt that he committed the murder. However, reports from Pakistan suggest that Sheikh continues to be active from jail, keeping in touch with friends and followers in Britain.

Sheikh was recruited as a student by Jaish-e-Muhammad (Army of Muhammad), which operates a network in Britain. It has actively recruited Britons from universities and colleges since the early 1990s, and has boasted of its numerous British Muslim volunteers. Investigations in Pakistan have suggested that on his visits there Shehzad Tanweer, one of the London suicide bombers, contacted members of two outlawed local groups and trained at two camps in Karachi and near Lahore. Indeed the network of groups now being uncovered in Pakistan may point to senior al-Qaida operatives having played a part in selecting members of the bombers' cell. The Observer Research Foundation has argued that there are even "grounds to suspect that the [London] blasts were orchestrated by Omar Sheikh from his jail in Pakistan".

Why then is Omar Sheikh not being dealt with when he is already under sentence of death? Astonishingly his appeal to a higher court against the sentence was adjourned in July for the 32nd time and has since been adjourned indefinitely. This is all the more remarkable when this is the same Omar Sheikh who, at the behest of General Mahmood Ahmed, head of the ISI, wired \$100,000 to Mohammed Atta, the leading 9/11 hijacker, before the New York attacks, as confirmed by Dennis Lormel, director of FBI's financial crimes unit.

Yet neither Ahmed nor Omar appears to have been sought for questioning by the US about 9/11. Indeed, the official 9/11 Commission Report of July 2004 sought to downplay the role of Pakistan with the comment: "To date, the US government has not been able to determine the origin of the money used for the 9/11 attacks. Ultimately the question is of little practical significance" – a statement of breathtaking disingenuousness.

All this highlights the resistance to getting at the truth about the 9/11 attacks and to an effective crackdown on the forces fomenting terrorist bombings in the west, including Britain. The extraordinary US forbearance towards Omar Sheikh, its restraint towards the father of Pakistan's atomic bomb, Dr AQ Khan, selling nuclear secrets to Iran, Libya and North Korea, the huge US military assistance to Pakistan and the US decision last year to designate Pakistan as a major non-Nato ally in south Asia all betoken a deeper strategic set of goals as the real priority in its relationship with Pakistan. These might be surmised as Pakistan providing sizeable military contingents for Iraq to replace US troops, or Pakistani troops replacing Nato forces in Afghanistan. Or it could involve the use of Pakistani military bases for US intervention in Iran, or strengthening Pakistan as a base in relation to India and China.

Whether the hunt for those behind the London bombers can prevail against these powerful political forces remains to be seen. Indeed it may depend on whether Scotland Yard, in its

attempts to uncover the truth, can prevail over MI6, which is trying to cover its tracks and in practice has every opportunity to operate beyond the law under the cover of national security.

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