

Britain: Observer claims threats by Washington prompted Heathrow terror raids

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On Sunday, October 1, the Observer newspaper revealed that the August 10 terror scare at Heathrow airport was triggered by the decision of US intelligence “to seize the key suspect in the UK’s biggest ever anti-terrorism operation and fly him to a secret detention centre for interrogation by American agents.”

The newspaper, which states that the information came from a “senior intelligence source,” explains:

“American intelligence agents told their British counterparts they were ready to ‘render’ Rashid Rauf, a British citizen allegedly linked to Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and who was under surveillance in Pakistan, unless he was picked up immediately.”

This demand “dismayed the British intelligence services, which were worried that it could prompt terrorist cells in the UK working on separate plots to bring forward their plans or go underground,” the *Observer* claims, as “Britain wanted more time to monitor Rauf.”

However, the US was determined to move immediately, “even if this meant riding roughshod over its closest ally,” the newspaper continued.

“Immediately following the US’s veiled ultimatum that MI6 should ‘lift’ Rauf, which was communicated to ISI [Pakistan’s security service], he was arrested by Pakistani intelligence officials, a move that forced the British police to carry out a series of arrests as they looked to pick up those allegedly linked to him.”

During early morning raids on August 10, 24 people were arrested and detained. Emergency measures imposed at all UK airports created chaos and lengthy delays and, in the atmosphere of panic and hysteria that ensued, there were numerous incidents of airplanes being turned back mid-flight due to bomb scares.

The *Observer* article is not the first to claim that it was the arrest of Rashid in Pakistan that triggered the emergency security measures. Press reports at the time alleged that Rauf was the “mastermind” behind a plot to explode up to a dozen transatlantic planes mid-flight so as to cause “mass murder on an unimaginable scale.”

In an effort to thwart this plot, it was claimed, Rauf was detained by the ISI on August 9. An accomplice then made a “panicked telephone call to a British suspect, directing him to go

ahead with the airliner plot.” It was on this basis that the government and police decided to raise the terror alert and make a series of arrests.

If the *Observer’s* source is to be believed, it would appear that Rauf was of interest to the security services only as part of a more general intelligence gathering exercise, rather than any active terror threat. Indeed, the newspaper states that “The intelligence source said the alleged plot had not been at the advanced planning stage.”

“US intelligence has harboured fears for many years that Pakistan’s intelligence service, the ISI, has not done enough to combat Al Qaeda and as a result was worried it would allow Rauf to flee,” it states.

“US agents had agreed on a plan to seize Rauf and fly him to an interrogation centre at a secret location if he remained at large,” it continues.

“But the British intelligence agencies were concerned that seizing Rauf too soon would compromise further investigations. Although there were allegedly significant amounts of wire-tap evidence, this could not be made use of in a British court, so a decision was taken to continue with Rauf’s surveillance.”

Obviously, reports that the British security services were anxious over detaining Rauf “too soon” cannot be squared with claims that a terror attack was “imminent.”

Yet, on August 10, Home Secretary John Reid claimed security services had narrowly foiled a terrorist plot to “bring down a number of aircraft through mid-flight explosions,” whilst Paul Stephenson, deputy commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, said that the intention was to commit “mass murder on an unimaginable scale.”

The warnings were just as alarming in the US, where Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff said that the alleged plot was “a very sophisticated plan and operation” in which the suspects had “accumulated the capability necessary and they were well on their way.”

Despite claims that the intelligence services had been able to act so quickly because they had been preparing their action well in advance, the apparent threat of a terrorist catastrophe did not prevent Prime Minister Tony Blair leaving for his Caribbean holiday on August 8.

In fact, within days of the terror scare, it had been revealed that none of the alleged plotters had purchased airline tickets and that several did not have passports. Despite extensive searches, no evidence has been presented that any bombs had even been assembled.

It is becoming ever clearer that there was no terrorist threat of the scale and immediacy claimed by the British and US governments and that the August 10 terror scare was motivated by political considerations.

In the US, faced with rising antiwar sentiment in advance of the November elections, the supposed plot was used by the White House to justify the Iraq invasion and the ongoing “war on terror.”

As for the Blair government, having been spurred into action by Washington, it nevertheless seized on the opportunity to mount a propaganda blitz of its own. It also provided the first

occasion for utilising its recently passed legislation allowing people to be detained without charge for up to 28 days.

The event again reveals the degree to which the Blair government is politically subordinate to the Bush administration—a fact that continues to create dismay within ruling circles and that prompted the leak to the *Observer*.

Beyond acting as a sounding board for disaffection within the security and political establishment, the *Observer* does not address any of the broader political ramifications of its claims. This is not surprising given the role of the media during the terror scare, when it acted as the propaganda arm of the state.

And it must be said that Washington's clear contempt for Pakistan is striking, even when compared to its cavalier attitude towards Britain—as epitomised by its threat to kidnap a British citizen and take him to be tortured.

Pakistan's President Musharraf recently revealed that the Bush administration had threatened to bomb his country back to the Stone Age if it did not collaborate fully in the war on terror.

His version of events is supported by the revelation that Washington had no confidence in Pakistan's commitment to clamping down on alleged Islamic extremists and was ready to mount a CIA operation on its territory unless the government did as it was told. Moreover, given Pakistan's notorious record of human rights abuses, it is appropriate to ask, just what treatment would Rauf have faced in the secret detention facility where the US planned to send him?

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