

British terror trial raises question of what MI5 knew about 2005 London bombings

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Following a series of damning revelations during the trial of seven men for their roles in the alleged “fertiliser bomb plot,” the government is continuing to dismiss calls for an independent inquiry into the July 7, 2005, London bombings.

Last week, Omar Khyam, Waheed Mahmood, Jawad Akbar, Salahuddin Amin and Anthony Garcia were jailed for life for conspiring to cause explosions likely to endanger life between January 1, 2003, and March 31, 2004. Two other men, Nabeel Hussain and Shujah Mahmood, were found not guilty after one of the longest-running anti-terror trials in the world. Operation Crevice involved 3,644 witness statements and 105 prosecution witnesses. The jury took a record 27 days to deliberate their verdict.

The seven were accused of purchasing 600 kg of ammonium nitrate (used as fertiliser) and storing it in a London unit in preparation for a major bomb attack in Britain. The 13-month hearing heard transcripts of the accused discussing potential targets including the Bluewater Shopping Centre in southern England and nightclubs.

Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair described the trial and its outcome as a “triumph” for Britain’s intelligence services and denounced those accusing the police of making strategic errors as “nay-sayers.”

His comments were part of a sustained offensive by the police, government and much of the media to quash renewed demands for an independent inquiry into the July 7 bombings, after the trial heard fresh evidence that two of the ringleaders of the explosions on London Underground trains and a bus—Mohammed Sidique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer—had been known to the intelligence services at least five months before they made their attack.

On May 1, survivors and relatives of those killed on July 7 delivered a letter to the Home Office calling for an “independent and impartial public inquiry” into the attack. Prime Minister Tony Blair rejected their demand and insisted MI5 was doing an “amazing job.” An inquiry would only divert resources from the fight against terrorism, Blair claimed.

In an unprecedented move, MI5 published a reply to criticisms on its website, “Rumours and Reality—the facts behind the myths,” whilst the press rolled into action to defend the intelligence agency. The *Guardian* editorialised, “An inquiry might rake over old failings, not current ones. It could add to the pressures on those policing terrorism. Carried out in private, it might not even do much to reassure the public....”

Whilst acknowledging that mistakes had been made, the editorial continued, “A one-off inquiry into an investigation that succeeded much more than it failed is not the way to make

it better.”

Writing in the *Independent*, Deborah Orr complained, “The last thing we need, in the wake of the Operation Crevice verdict, is an elaborate inquiry, which would simply be another way of throwing money away.”

In the same newspaper, Howard Jacobson argued, “I wonder how many of those calling for this inquiry were busy telling us not all that long ago that there was no terrorism for our security services to police. An invention of our respective governments—Blair’s and Bush’s—the lot of it.”

Disparaging the questions raised over the real purpose of Bush and Blair’s “war on terror,” he continued, “is that a ‘sorry’ I hear amid the accusations that we have not been sufficiently vigilant? A sorry from those who thought vigilance was uncalled for and sinister?”

Such a pose of self-serving triumphalism will do nothing to quell the questions raised by the Old Bailey hearing, and their grave implications for democratic rights.

Most damning of all is the revelation that MI5 was well aware of the identities of several of those who went on to carry out the July 7 bombings and their involvement in terror activities, but decided not to follow them up.

The trial heard that, several months before the accused were arrested, police had been tipped off by the storage unit as to the quantity of fertiliser being held on its premises. Having replaced the fertiliser with a harmless substance, a plainclothes police officer was stationed at the reception whilst hidden surveillance cameras recorded everyone attending the facility.

“Operation Crevice” was therefore intended as a massive information-gathering exercise. The court heard how the probe uncovered 55 individuals known to have associated with the plotters, of whom 15 were considered “essential” targets. Yet, Khan and Tanweer were “parked up” with the remainder—i.e. treated as non-urgent cases. This is despite MI5 recording meetings between Khan and Tanweer on four occasions in 2004 with Omar Khyam, described at the Old Bailey as the ringleader of the fertiliser plot.

The court also heard how Khan was amongst several of the accused that had attended a terrorist camp in the Afghan border region in July 2003, and that anti-terror police had investigated two cars linked to him, five months before the July 7 bombings. Yet, despite having his name and address, no follow-up was made.

MI5 claims that this was because the two had not been heard discussing terrorist acts and “appeared as petty fraudsters.” But in transcripts of bugged conversations played in court, Khan is heard discussing attending a terror training camp and conducting financial scams in preparation for what his co-conspirator describes as “a one-way ticket.”

Neither has MI5 been able to explain why it omitted sending surveillance pictures of Khan to the FBI during its interrogation of the so-called Al Qaeda “supergrass” (informer) Mohammed Junaid Babar, who gave evidence for the prosecution.

MI5’s claims regarding Khan and Tanweer are, moreover, contradicted by a 37-page

document compiled for the Crown Prosecution Service, which was revealed by the *Sunday Times* on May 6.

According to the newspaper, the CPS document states that “MI5 surveillance showed the pair [Khan and Tanweer] ‘were concerned with intended terrorist activity’ when they met with a gang planning a bombing at the Bluewater shopping centre in Kent.”

It also states that Kahn was “identified” six months before he carried out the July 7 bombings.

It is proof that Khan and Tanweer had been identified by the intelligence services months before July 7 that has particularly angered survivors of the London explosions. At the time, then-Home Secretary Charles Clarke had claimed those involved were “clean skins”—i.e., unknown to the police and intelligence services—whilst Blair told parliament, “I know of no intelligence specific enough” to have prevented the attacks.

The *Times* notes that only last week, current Home Secretary John Reid had told MPs that that “neither Khan nor Tanweer were ‘known’ to the security services until after July 7. He later said police and security services had ‘no records on them.’ “

The *Times* added that the CPS document “argues that meetings between the two men and the fertiliser plotters in 2004 were so significant they should have been brought to the jury’s attention.”

Evidence that MI5 had been able to identify Khan and Tanweer has also led to accusations that it withheld information from parliament’s Intelligence and Security Committee.

The ISC report issued in May 2006 stated that none of the July 7 bombers had been “named and listed” as potential terror threats. It stated that although MI5 had come across Khan and Tanweer “on the peripheries” of other investigative operations, their identities were unknown.

The ISC was also not shown surveillance photographs of the meetings between Khan, Tanweer and Omar Khyam. Security officials have said this was not necessary, as members of the ISC were aware of the links. “The reason they were not shown them is because it didn’t add to the facts. If they had felt the need to ask to see them, they would have asked,” one source was reported as stating.

The ISC is a toothless body, appointed by the prime minister and responsible directly to him. It is for this reason, and to divert demands for a more far-ranging independent inquiry, that Blair established his 2005 investigation. It is for the same reason that the ISC has meekly said it will “look again” at information revealed during the trial.

In addition to the damning evidence of MI5’s foreknowledge of Khan and Tanweer’s involvement in terror plots, the fertiliser trial has raised many other fundamental questions.

In the same leader cited above, the *Guardian* revealed that “restrictive limits on reporting” over the last 13 months meant that the “story of Operation Crevice...will come as a surprise to almost everyone outside the narrow circle of politicians and security professionals who—together with those present in court—were aware that one of the most remarkable trials in British criminal history had been underway.”

On what grounds were such restrictions imposed, and for whose purposes? The *Guardian* does not say. In a separate article, the newspaper also noted that the ISC's 2006 findings were "written under restrictions to avoid prejudicing the trial of the fertiliser bomb plotters." In other words, the findings of the only "investigation" into July 7 were themselves subject to even further restrictions.

Then there are the allegations made during the trial that Britain's security services had sanctioned the torture in Pakistan of one of the accused, Salahuddin Amin.

A British citizen, Amin was arrested and interrogated in Pakistan for 10 months, during which he alleges he was beaten and flogged, threatened with an electric drill, and forced to listen to the screams of others being abused before confessing to his involvement in a bomb-making conspiracy.

He has accused MI5 of directing his abuse—alleging that he was visited on at least 10 occasions during his detention by MI5 officers, and that one of his interrogations may have been filmed for Britain's security forces who were simultaneously questioning his co-accused in London. Amin was eventually freed in Pakistan, having been told that he had been "cleared in England" and could leave the country. He was arrested as soon as his plane landed at Heathrow.

In court, Amin's counsel, Patrick O'Connor QC—who is helping prepare a civil action against the British government—suggested that both sides in the so-called war on terror had come "to share common standards of illegality and immorality."

What of the role of "supergrass" Babar, who was given immunity from prosecution in Britain after pleading guilty to terrorism offences in a New York court?

Babar said that he faced the death penalty for his role in a conspiracy to kill Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf if he had not collaborated with the FBI. In the US, he also confessed to obtaining ammonium nitrate and aluminium powder for use by the fertiliser plotters, and in court, he testified that he had attended a terrorist training camp in Pakistan in 2003 where he met Khyam, Mahmood, Garcia and Amin.

The BBC reported how Babar had been "well trained" for his role in the trial and had "memorised his statement to the British police, given to counter-terrorism officers while he was in custody in the US, and knew every date and location in the long story of the conspiracy." Under questioning, however, "cracks began to appear in his carefully prepared account," and at the end of his evidence, "the jury themselves sent a note" asking for him to explain again key details of his testimony.

For their part, defence lawyers have accused Babar of being a double agent.

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