

Ricin plot: London and Washington used plot to strengthen Iraq war push

By [Global Research](#)

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We bring to the attention of our readers several related articles on the alleged ricin in January 2003, which was used by the British and US governments as a pretext to invade Iraq. The evidence suggests that the ricin threat was based on fabricated intelligence and was deliberately used as pretext for war. And those who relied on the ricin plot to justify the war are war criminals.

Ricin plot: London and Washington used plot to strengthen Iraq war push

by **Richard Norton-Taylor**

The Guardian 14 April 2005

Claims that a terrorist cell was planning a lethal ricin attack in Britain were used by the British and American governments in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq.

Tony Blair, David Blunkett, then home secretary, and Britain's most senior police officers, all seized on the arrests to emphasise the threat from what they called a new and highly dangerous kind of terrorist. To further press the case for war, politicians implied there was a clear link between Saddam Hussein, al-Qaida, and terrorists planning chemical or biological attacks on targets in the west, including London.

The ricin claims were seized on most strikingly by Colin Powell, the US secretary of state, in his dramatic but now discredited speech on Iraq's alleged weapons of mass destruction programme to the UN security council on February 5 2003, five weeks before the invasion.

Insisting "every statement I make today is backed up by sources, solid sources", Mr Powell spoke of a "sinister nexus between Iraq and the al-Qaida terrorist network".

He said that according to a detainee named Abuwatia, Musab al-Zarqawi, the Islamist linked to al-Qaida and recently self-proclaimed perpetrator of atrocities in Iraq, ordered "North African extremists" to travel to Europe to conduct "poison and explosive attacks". Mr Powell referred to arrests in France.

Mr Powell then stated: "The detainee who helped piece this together says the plot also targeted Britain. Later evidence, again, proved him right. When the British unearthed a cell there just last month, one British police officer was murdered during the disruption of the cell." It was a reference to Stephen Oake.

It seems clear Mr Blair personally alerted the Bush administration to the British arrests. Two

days before Mr Powell delivered his UN statement, Mr Blair reported to the Commons on his return from talks with President George Bush: "Iraq is not the only country posing a risk in respect of WMD. Over the past few weeks, we have seen powerful evidence of the continuing terrorist threat: the suspected ricin plot in London and Manchester . . ."

On February 6 2003, the day after Mr Powell's UN speech, Mr Blair kept up the momentum using the alleged threat from ricin in a televised appeal for public backing on Iraq.

Press reports rammed home the point. "In a powerful speech to the UN security council," said the Sun newspaper, Mr Powell "told how an Osama bin Laden lieutenant sheltered by Iraq was linked to the ricin poison factory found in north London and the murder of DC Stephen Oake in Manchester."

After the suspects were arrested in January 2003, David Veness, Britain's top anti-terrorist policeman, and Dr Pat Troop, the government's deputy chief medical officer, warned in a joint statement: "A small amount of the material recovered from the Wood Green premises has been tested positive for the presence of ricin poison."

Two days later, on January 7 2003, Mr Blair referred to the arrests at a gathering of British ambassadors in London. They were a stark illustration, he said, of the dangers of "weap-ons of mass destruction". He warned: "The danger is present and real and with us now and its potential is huge."

The following weekend, the Sunday Times published a long article under the headline: "Terror On The Doorstep."

References to ricin continued to be made by senior Scotland Yard officers and ministers, though the media could not report on them because of judicial reporting restrictions.

Peter Hain, leader of the Commons, claimed last year that MI5 warned him of a possible al-Qaida attack on the Commons chamber, using ricin or anthrax.

Terrorist plot: Exaggerated threats

Guardian, 14 April 2005

The acquittal of four suspects this week – and the dropping of charges against another four – in the "ricin" terrorist plot raises wider issues than just the effectiveness of our current terrorist investigating processes. Two years ago the arrests of the suspects were used by Tony Blair and Colin Powell – just weeks before the Iraq invasion – to suggest that al-Qaida had established a cell in London. The prime minister said the ricin arrests showed "this danger is present and real and with us now and its potential is huge". Colin Powell included the January 2003 arrests as evidence in his presentation to the UN in February 2003 that Iraq and Osama bin Laden were supporting and directing terrorist poison cells throughout Europe. Geoff Hoon, defence secretary, congratulated the police and MI5 and suggested that if the defendants were convicted, the officers should indeed be given as much beer as they could drink.

There will not be much drinking or celebrating within security service circles today. Only one of the nine suspects arrested two years ago has been convicted of terrorist offences. The suspect convicted, Kamel Bourgass, a 31-year-old Algerian, was clearly a vicious and dangerous man. He killed one special branch officer with a kitchen knife and stabbed three

other officers trying to overpower him. He was convicted of killing detective Stephen Oake earlier – in a trial where reporting was prohibited because of the subsequent trial of himself and four other suspects that ended this week – and has now been found guilty of plotting chemical attacks. But if only the restraints that have been applied to the trials, had been applied when the nine suspects were arrested two years ago. All manner of exaggeration and embellishment occurred on the arrests. There were said to be traces of ricin – a deadly poison for which there is no antidote – in the north London flat where the first arrests were made. In fact there were only ricin recipes. Subsequent tests by the Porton Down science laboratories found no trace of ricin on any equipment found in the flat. But even if they had, ricin is not a poison which can be easily used for mass murder.

What was unsavoury was the way in which the arrests were used to heighten people's fears and exaggerate the threat of al-Qaida. But there is another threat that the Bourgass conviction poses. He was a failed asylum seeker who went underground. Stand by for the opportunistic Tories to use the case to continue their attack on refugees. Such blunt attacks are as poisonous as ricin on civic society.

With poison in their souls:

The demonisation of the ricin suspects by politicians and the media smacks of Salem

by Mary Riddell

The Observer, 17 April 2005

KITCHEN TABLE TERROR is not new. The Wood Green 'ricin' larder, stocked with lethal ingredients, such as cherry stones and apple pips, brings back memories of Auntie Annie's 'bomb factory' at the height of the IRA's mainland assault.

Annie Maguire, a court was told, taught her small children how to mix up nitroglycerine for the paramilitaries in her Kilburn parlour. Under prosecution questioning about what bombs looked like, her son, Patrick, drew on his knowledge of the Beano and described a 'long black ball with a wire coming out of it'.

The fantasy was enough. Mrs Maguire, a monster for a fearful nation, was jailed for many years. Two of her sons were also locked up and her younger children farmed out. Of those sentenced with her, her brother-in-law, Giuseppe Conlon, died in prison, of emphysema and despair, with an inmates' chorus of 'What shall we do with the fucking bombers?' in his ears.

More than a quarter of a century later, in February this year, Tony Blair apologised publicly to the Maguire seven for one of the gravest miscarriages of justice of the last century. There was no bomb factory and no plot. Annie Maguire and her family had long since been declared innocent. They deserved, the Prime Minister said, to be 'completely and publicly exonerated.'

By then, another war on terror was in train. Other suspects had supposedly been bottling death like marmalade, and the long trial of Kamel Bourgass and his alleged co-chefs was nearing its end. Last week, Bourgass was convicted of conspiring to cause a public nuisance. Four others were cleared and a second trial of four more men abandoned.

There was no ricin and no al-Qaeda recipe, only a formula apparently concocted by a white American Christian survivalist and downloaded from the internet. Even if Bourgass, a nasty and deluded loner, had managed to create his poison and smear it on car-door handles, it would not have worked. Had Bourgass the poisoner devoted himself to creating the perfect Nigella chickpea couscous, he could hardly have been a less likely mass exterminator.

But he had another persona. Bourgass the murderer, a failed asylum seeker, knifed Stephen Oake to death when the police came looking for him. The killing of a brave officer shifted the story into the arms of Michael Howard, who flouted the compassion of DC Oake's widow and attacked the 'chaos' of the asylum system.

Labour is unlikely to have minded this switch of focus. The annual number of asylum applicants, now 34,000, has almost halved since Bourgass applied, and the backlog of cases has been sliced from 50,000 to 10,000 in a decade. Electronic fingerprinting and e-borders make police better able to find people who change identity, as he did, and monitor who is entering and leaving the country.

THERE IS evidence, too, that Mr Howard's own-brand fear factory is driving voters towards Labour. Last of all, the Home Secretary has seized the chance to promote ID cards, even though they would have made not a shred of difference in the Bourgass case. The Tories' insidious opportunism on asylum and immigration should not disguise that the government also cashed in on bogus ricin, disseminating panic with an efficiency of which Bourgass could only dream.

In the absence of chemical poison, a war against Iraq, a fake link between al-Qaeda and Saddam and a double helping of contempt of court were brewed up on Kamel Bourgass's hob. Tony Blair, David Blunkett, Colin Powell and senior police officers all used the arrests to illustrate the existence of a new breed of Islamist super-terrorist. A criminal prosecution was exploited to fit a political agenda. A war was justified and civil liberties imperilled by the ricin stash that never was.

The case is over, but old myths die hard. In the age of the precautionary principle and Donald Rumsfeld's unknown unknowns, reality gets so sparse that even the most blatant lies acquire substance.

The day after the case ended, London's Evening Standard was barmily talking up 'a new terror fear over lost poison' on the basis of a police claim that an al-Qaeda cell could have the 'missing ricin'. But even if a quantity of poison existed, which it did not, it would have harmlessly degraded long ago. Fear and prejudice have a longer half-life. Once manufactured, they are almost impossible to unmake.

Right-wing conflation of asylum and terror will be difficult to unknot. Lawyers for the eight cleared men are outraged at the way their clients have been portrayed by the media and politicians, and there is so little acknowledgment of a just result, from the Home Office and elsewhere, that one wonders if dodgy convictions would have left some politicians more satisfied. Meanwhile, a new terror law, more draconian than expected, is in the Labour manifesto, pushing criminal trials for those who 'glorify or condone acts of terror'.

The hunger for something new eclipses the fact that all necessary means were in place to stop Bourgass, who slipped through the immigration net after a shoplifting conviction because no official was available to interview him and whose murder of DC Oake followed

some questionable operational decisions by Greater Manchester police.

Bourgass will, probably and rightly, spend the bulk of his life in jail. But, as our leaders have not said, it was also proper that those charged with him were cleared. None was vindicated because terror prosecutions are too difficult or evidence inadmissible. They were supposedly caught in the kitchen with their fingers in the ricin pot. Nothing could be more damning, except that it wasn't true.

A PANEL OF their peers devoted many weeks to assessing the evidence and discovered that there was none. The result was a tribute to beleaguered juries and a vindication of a justice system that politicians often deem too arcane, or too wilful, for an age of nameless fears and elusive proof.

The affair of the sham ricin casts a long shadow over the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, the credulous sensationalists of the media and, most of all, over politicians. Last week was a good one for the rule of law, but the sullen reaction to the outcome also highlights a dangerous disregard for justice.

Eight innocent men were presumed guilty. Ten others held for two years without charge reportedly had non-existent links to the ricin plot cited on their government control orders. Sanctions get harsher and the borderline grows fainter between fair trials and wild allegation garbed in flimsy intelligence and sanctified as truth. All the lessons of what could happen next lie in our recent past.

Justice tailored to a time of terror, real or perceived, is the shortcut back to the world in which Annie Maguire was torn from the dock, kicking and hysterical, to begin her 14-year-sentence. 'I'm innocent, you bastards,' she cried. 'No, no, no.' But this was Salem. So the door slammed on her screaming and almost no one thought she might be right.

How secret papers led to ricin raid:

An informer told Algerian interrogators that Britain is facing an al-Qaeda threat.

Jason Burke

THE Algerian secret service intelligence reports that arrived at Scotland Yard in January 2003 still make frightening reading. Based on interrogations of a senior Islamic militant, they gave details of a plot to poison Britons, and contained information on scores of individuals in the UK who appeared to be deeply engaged in hardline, violent Islamic radicalism. Worse, they suggested a number of shadowy cells in Britain beyond the poisoners. They were not disclosed to the terrorist trial at the Old Bailey last week and are still classified 'secret'.

Kamel Bourgass, a 31-year-old Algerian, was convicted of murdering a policeman and conspiring to cause a public nuisance by using poisons and explosives. That gained the headlines. But four of his co-accused were acquitted of terrorist offences, and the trial of four others was abandoned, unravelling the so-called poison network described in the report.

So, where are we now? Was the case a farrago, the threats of al-Qaeda cells imagined by one informant egged on by over-enthusiastic intelligence officers? Should we be more, or less, scared?

That may depend on the reliability of Mohammed Meguerba, the captured militant who fingered Bourgass from a cell in Algiers. Open on my desk are secret intelligence documents describing Meguerba's interrogation. They allow what he said to be revealed for the first time. Meguerba told his story after being arrested in Algeria in late 2002 after jumping bail for immigration offences in Britain.

An epileptic, Meguerba left his homeland in 1995 and travelled through Europe, ending up as a waiter in Ireland where he married, divorced, remarried and, 'by pure chance or cultural void', said the Algerian secret service, 'allowed himself to be recruited by fundamentalists' at a Belfast mosque in 2000. Activists in London sent him to training camps in Afghanistan. Then Osama bin Laden himself gave him a mission in the UK, with a false passport and \$ 600.

A wealth of detail in Meguerba's testimony confirms he was, at least until this point, largely truthful about himself. The names of some activists he supplied are corroborated by information from other militants. Meguerba gave details of two training camps, Khaldan and Darunta, which I inspected after their evacuation by al-Qaeda in 2001. His descriptions tally exactly with my own notes.

Another telling fact is a disclosure of a warning by bin Laden to recruits to prepare for a US response to the 9/11 attacks. This was not public knowledge until last year.

Details about Britain also largely stack up. Meguerba was given money by a senior militant already in the UK to get a new identity and start trading sweets in a London market. The Algerians say he started practising the manufacture of poison, 'as he had been shown in the Afghan camps'. This again checks out: I found a basic chemical laboratory in Darunta camp and a stack of documents downloaded from rightwing American survivalist websites detailing recipes for chemical and biological 'nasties'.

The information that sent police to a flat in Wood Green, north London, came from Meguerba. 'Better still,' he told Special Branch, 'the London group to which he belonged has. . . an amount of poison they are prepared to use. . . According to MG (Meguerba), the poison is hidden in two tubs of beauty cream carrying the Nivea label.' Meguerba gave the flat's address and said it was occupied by 'an Algerian affiliated with al-Qaeda'. This same man, now known as Bourgass, was convicted last week, though no jars of ricin have ever been found. This is where a question mark appears over Meguerba's truthfulness.

Another reason to doubt Meguerba is the possibility he was tortured in Algeria. However, transcripts of a Scotland Yard interview with him show him as confident, not a broken victim. And his story is often unhelpful to the police.

But there are signs the Algerians made more of his words than was justified. They had received information on suspects in Algeria from the UK and wanted to reciprocate.

Then bigger issues came into play. The 'ricin cell' bust was trumpeted by the Home Secretary, the Prime Minister and by Colin Powell, then the US Secretary of State, in his speech to the United Nations justifying the Iraq war. At each stage, the cell's threat was amplified. Soon its members were global superterrorists connected to al-Qaeda and, fortuitously, based in Iraq. Yet no ricin was found, let alone a link to Saddam Hussein.

In fact, some of Meguerba's testimony accurately describes a world of amateurism familiar

to anyone who has studied Islamic militancy. Bourgass's plan to smear ricin on door handles on the Holloway Road was a dud. Even if he could have made it, ricin will not penetrate skin.

Last week's acquittals followed the vastly inflated expectations, raised by inflammatory statements by politicians who know that, post-9/11, a constant and massive threat is a philosophical given. Bourgass is a violent, unstable man full of hate, but not a skilled terrorist. Normal legal procedure has put him in jail.

Of the other eight men cleared of terror charges, six have been detained over fake documents, including passports. Our legal system worked. But what of the ongoing threat in the UK that the Algerians say was revealed by Meguerba?

In a sense, it doesn't matter who is telling the truth. There will be a terrorist threat to the UK, from a variety of sources, for the foreseeable future. It is as Meguerba said: nowhere near as grave as our politicians and tabloids say, but it is there none the less. And we must learn to live with it.

Jason Burke's 'Al-Qaeda: The True story of Radical Islam' is published by Pengu

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