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Some Thoughts on the London Bombs

Strategic Insights, Volume IV, Issue 9 (September 2005)

by [Maria Rasmussen](#)

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Introduction

We've all seen the photos—the commuters emerging from the London Underground with bloodied faces, the CCTV image of Hasib Hussain at Luton station about to board a bus carrying his deadly cargo, the grave face of Sir Ian Blair after his men shot and killed an innocent man. It is too early to draw conclusions from these incidents, particularly in view of the fact that we still have major gaps in knowledge. We do not know what happened in Pakistan last year, when three of the July 7 suicide bombers paid a visit. We cannot yet fully explain their radicalization. And we don't even know if the two separate bombings of July 7 and July 21 are connected. In spite of these (and other) open questions, this short essay offers some ideas or propositions about terrorist motivations and tactics, and about counterterrorist policies.

Terrorist Motivations and Tactics

Attempting to account for the terrorists' motivations on July 7, many pointed to the G8 summit in Gleneagles (Scotland), and to the fact that London was in the midst of celebrations following its successful bid at hosting the Olympics in 2012. The argument was that the terrorists seized on a moment that was guaranteed to offer maximum publicity. The terrorists themselves offered an alternative and very plausible explanation, which Al Qaeda repeated in its communiqué three weeks later:

it is time to take revenge against the British Zionist Crusader government in retaliation for the massacres Britain is committing in Iraq and Afghanistan... We have repeatedly warned the British government and people. We have fulfilled our promise and carried out our blessed military raid ... We continue to warn the governments of Denmark and Italy and all the Crusader governments that they will be punished in the same way if they do not withdraw their troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.[1]

It is still too early to assess what impact this will have on British public life. According to *The Economist* there is "little political or popular pressure for withdrawal of the 8,500 troops that are still in Iraq." [2] By the same token, even though British public opinion is—and has been—largely

against the Iraq war, the so-called Downing Street memo had almost no impact on the outcome of the recent general election that returned Tony Blair to power for a third term. However, the statements by Mr. Blair and others in his cabinet that the London explosions are unconnected to events in Iraq are at best disingenuous. The BBC hosted a fascinating online debate on the London bombs which indicates that many Britons make a direct connection between these attacks and the UK's foreign policy.[3] In any event, the argument that Mr. Blair and Mr. Bush have repeatedly made about fighting terrorists in Iraq just so that we don't have to fight them at home has collapsed.

Beyond this, the London attacks challenged conventional wisdom in two different ways. First, press reports described the London bombers as "foot soldiers." [4] The implication is that they were manipulated, used, ordered about by the real culprits—Osama bin Laden, radical clerics. But were they? The July 7 suicide bombers were British born and bred. Though information about the July 21 bombers is still fragmentary, it appears that several are British citizens, though not necessarily British born. By all accounts, these men appeared to be thoroughly Westernized. In this they remind us of Mohammed Atta and some of his cohort in the Hamburg cell, or of Zacarias Moussaoui and his experience in France. The greater their exposure to the West, the more their alienation grew.[5]

Zacarias Moussaoui's brother has attempted to explain his radicalization by describing the Arab and Muslim experience in France. Abd Samad Moussaoui tells a story of racism, deprivation, and the search for an identity.[6] His account says little about Muslim religious fanaticism. What his explanation does bring to mind is relative deprivation theory—the discrepancy between economic, social, and political expectations and actual achievement—and Franz Fanon's arguments about the role of violence in the creation of identity.[7] These are some of the same issues that Leslie Scarman raised in his seminal report on the Brixton (London) race riots twenty years ago. These are also the issues that were raised during race riots in the north of England four years ago, a stone's throw, in fact, from the home of the July 7 suicide bombers.[8]

These problems are not circumscribed to France and the UK. There is the murder of Theo van Gogh by a Dutch-born Muslim in November 2004, and the participation of Italian and Spanish Muslims in terrorist cells to suggest otherwise. All of this indicates that rather than looking at immigration quotas or asylum policies, as Mr. Blair and others in Europe want to do now, we should be looking at assimilation policies and at the Muslim experience in Christian and secular Europe over the last twenty years. Something has gone terribly wrong here, and it is not something that can be explained through resort to the idea of a "clash of civilizations," or not exclusively.

It should also be pointed out that we do not even know whether these attacks were the work of Al Qaeda. What we do know, especially about the July 7 suicide bombers, suggests that journalist Jason Burke is right when he argues that Al Qaeda ceased to exist as a terrorist organization following the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. What we have now is not a terrorist organization but a collection of independent cells that (more or less) buy into the Al Qaeda ideology. These cells may, in some cases, receive some assistance from the nucleus around Osama bin Laden, though Burke compares him to a venture capitalist and stresses that this assistance is by no means a given. Burke argues cogently that a more centralized Al Qaeda is easier to counter, and that this proliferation of *groupuscules* makes for a much more dangerous world.[9]

A second aspect of these London bombings challenges conventional wisdom.

Since September 11th, we have been focusing on terrorist "spectaculars"—potential large scale terrorist attacks with or without weapons of mass destruction—and, judging by Michael Chertoff's recent statements, we will continue to do so. But we must now acknowledge the disruptive potential of these relatively small scale incidents which we have grown to disregard. The reality is that a small scale attack such as those London witnessed on July 7 or July 21 can paralyze a city

and cause major disruption. During the first bombing incidents on July 7, total disruption to mass transit lasted over 24 hours. The police advised the public to refrain from going to work if at all possible, and all West End theatres closed, something which had not occurred since World War II. False alarms led to an average of ten closures (of stations or lines) per day in the following week. Portions of the Underground were not open until the first week in August. A similar situation developed during the second set of attacks on July 21 when the entire mass transit system shut down. Significant numbers of London residents were unable to go to work or return to their homes.^[10] The attacks also pushed some political leaders into a moral panic—the United States and other countries immediately increased security on subway and bus systems, though the chance that terrorists would hit in similar fashion across countries was slim.

Counterterrorist Policies

Shortly before 9/11, Jeffrey Rosen traveled to the UK to study the British experience with closed-circuit television, or CCTV. He described an Orwellian world in which, on any given day, the average Briton is watched by some 300 cameras. The impetus behind the spread of CCTV in the 1990s was the threat posed to the City, the financial district in London, by Irish Republican Army bombs. Yet in his many conversations with senior police officers, in London and elsewhere in the UK, Rosen was not offered a single example of CCTV having any impact on terrorism. He also reviewed Home Office research that argued that CCTV had little impact on crime, and no impact on violent crime. Therefore, Rosen suggested that CCTV was more trouble than it was worth. He described it as a very expensive way to catch pickpockets and as an important curb on privacy.^[11]

However, all the July 7 suicide bombers and three of the five bombers on July 21 were identified and tracked thanks to CCTV. The celerity with which the police investigation moved validates, for the first time, Britain's reliance on CCTV. It would seem that authorities in New York City have reached the same conclusion, as plans to rely on surveillance cameras for mass transit have recently been announced.^[12]

Whether these attacks validate a hard line response to the terrorist problem remains to be seen. Tony Blair seemed to think so this past March, in the midst of a debate over a new and controversial terror law. The legislative battle was described as “parliament's longest and sometimes rowdiest sitting for 99 years.”^[13] The prime minister was forced to offer major concessions to the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, in the form of a sunset clause. Essentially, the bill passed once Mr. Blair promised to review it, and possibly repeal it, in a year. During that debate, the prime minister made the same “liberty vs. security” argument that former Attorney General John Ashcroft made after September 11th:

“Were there to be a serious terrorist act in this country and afterwards it was thought that we had not taken the measures necessary, believe me, no one would be talking about civil liberties; they would be talking about why we had not done more to protect the security of this country.”^[14]

Mr. Blair may be right. In the United States following 9/11, opinion polls showed marked support for draconian counterterrorist measures even at a cost to civil liberties, and Alan Dershowitz and Steven Brill, well-known civil libertarian authors, were arguing in favor of torture warrants and national I.D. cards. In Britain, early polls in the wake of 7/7 showed phenomenal support for shoot-to-kill practices, even when the result is a loss of innocent life. However, two thirds of those surveyed rejected other policy options such as racial profiling or juryless trials for terrorist offences.^[15] There are two factors worth remembering. The first is that Britain has a long tradition of hard line counterterrorist policies, and a long experience with Irish terrorism. Variations in the latter seem to have evolved independently of the former. In fact, the worst years of Irish terrorism coincided with the most repressive policies—internment without trial, exclusion orders, questionable interrogation practices, the reliance on accomplice testimony as sole

evidence in court. Hard line policies had no impact on violence and may have stimulated greater violence. The UK experience with Irish terrorism suggests that legal responses do not necessarily have bearing on the scope and intensity of violence. The victory over terrorism, if and when it comes, is always the result of a combination of force and politics. Mr. Blair himself seemed to have recognized this point in 1998, when he sought a negotiated agreement with Irish nationalists, the Good Friday agreement. But in 2001 his government passed the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act, which among other things brought back internment.^[16] The recent London bombings could be said to validate the argument that sacrificing liberty does not necessarily achieve security.

Mr. Blair will present the new package of legal proposals to parliament in the fall. Press discussions so far have mentioned greater reliance on exclusion orders and deportation, both of which have been around since the early versions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act in the 1970s, and a review of current asylum policies. Additionally, Mr. Blair proposes to introduce the crimes of endorsement or glorification of terrorism and of acts preparatory to terrorism. These are problematic—they have been vaguely defined and might include visiting radical websites or browsing the Anarchist Cookbook. Finally, the prime minister proposes to extend the period of pre-trial detention for terrorist suspects. This brings us to the second point worth remembering. The UK is constrained by the need to harmonize legislation with European law, particularly after Mr. Blair incorporated the European Human Rights Convention into British law. In early June 2005, the Council of Europe's human rights commissioner, Alvaro Gil-Robles, released a report highly critical of Mr. Blair's human rights record and especially of his outlook on the war on terror.^[17] In the past, Irish terrorists and their families successfully used the European Court of Human Rights to challenge British law and British actions. It is likely that British Muslims caught in the war on terror will also do so.

There are also practical arguments against a hard line response to these bombings. The Irish experience shows that emergency measures such as internment without trial served as recruitment tools for the IRA. They would serve the same purpose now. In addition, we know that the constabulary and MI5 lack human sources in the Muslim community. They are not likely to make any inroads unless they gain credibility within the community, and some of the measures proposed will not help. Finally, there are indications that the Liberal Democrats will not support the most draconian of the measures proposed. The Conservatives have also expressed reservations.^[18] Mr. Blair might still be able to push legislation through parliament, but the existence of deep divisions within the political class would deprive this legislation of legitimacy.

Beyond this, there are indications that Britain will go through the introspection and hand-wringing that we in the United States went through after 9/11. Questions about what went wrong and whether these attacks could have been prevented, and how, will crop up just like they did in America after 9/11 and in Spain after 3/11. On this point it is interesting to note that in the United States we developed the view that the centralization of intelligence is the panacea—at least judging by the rush to implement the 9/11 Commission recommendations through organizational reform. But there are those in Britain who make (and have made) the opposite case. In an excellent study of British intelligence after the Cold War, journalist Mark Urban, a former intelligence officer, argued that the homogenous, single view that the Joint Intelligence Committee presents deprives policy makers of alternatives. Urban argued that the American system duplicates effort but also provides checks and balances, which he claims the British system lacks.^[19]

Ultimately, if the London bombs prove anything, it is that such attacks are frequently inevitable, and no amount of organizational reform will change that. We know that British intelligence is very competent, that it operates with few legal constraints, and that it has wide sectors of the population under surveillance. Journalist Tony Geraghty wrote a very entertaining book describing intelligence collection in Northern Ireland, which earned him a prosecution under the Official Secrets Act. Geraghty describes a variety of legal and semi-legal, technical and human

surveillance methods which extend far beyond the terrorists and their sympathizers.[20] We also know thanks to MI5 whistleblowers such as Cathy Massiter and David Shayler that all manner of legal groups and law-abiding individuals on the British mainland are routinely under surveillance, including at least three members of Tony Blair's cabinet.

We also know that that surveillance is not always legal, and that former Home Secretaries, whose job it was to monitor MI5, acknowledge that they frequently did not know what was going on. We have to assume that radical Islamic organizations in the UK are now observed with the same attention that the trade unions or the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament received in the past.[21] And yet by all accounts 7/7 caught the intelligence community by surprise. In future weeks the spotlight will be on MI5, on its reliance on technical intelligence collection, on the paucity of its human sources inside the Muslim community. These avenues are all worth exploring. But the Hasib Hussains of this world will still board trains and buses carrying bombs in backpacks.

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