

Terrorist Attacks in the United Kingdom:

More Faces of al-Qaeda

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Brief Analysis

There are fast-moving developments in the British hunt for the terrorist cell that tried to set off two car bombs in central London on June 29. Two men were arrested after they tried to crash a vehicle loaded with flammable material into a Glasgow airport terminal on June 30. And a man and woman were arrested yesterday when their vehicle was stopped on the major highway between London and Scotland. Houses have been searched in several parts of Britain, and the number detained rose to eight today, including one in an undisclosed foreign country.

After the attacks, British prime minister Gordon Brown, who only replaced Tony Blair on June 27, stated, "[I]t is clear that we are dealing, in general terms, with people who are associated with al-Qaeda." Despite the failure of the two London car bombs to detonate and the apparent bungling of the Glasgow airport attack, there is public concern that the terrorist cell was apparently unknown to British security services. Last year, then-head of the British Security Service (MI5) Eliza Manningham-Buller said she knew of thirty plots threatening the United Kingdom and 1,600 individuals who were under surveillance.

Threat to Airports and Tourist Sights

It is unlikely that the British police will charge the arrested suspects or confirm their identities for several days. But the need to tighten security in Britain and other countries has been recognized immediately. Air travel will face even higher security, with departing passengers no longer able to bring vehicles as close to departure terminals.

Various "picture postcard" sites have long been considered possible targets because of their recognizability around the world. For example, the target of the first London car bomb appeared to be customers of a popular bar near Piccadilly Circus, while the second bomb was initially parked close to nearby Trafalgar Square, where those fleeing the carnage of the first blast might have fled. (The second car was towed away for being illegally parked and was only discovered to be a bomb hours later in a police impound lot.) In response, British police are actively and visibly patrolling shopping centers, train stations, and airports, while security is at the highest level of alert, defined as when

a further attack is considered imminent.

Implications for British Counterterrorism Efforts

Little comfort can be taken from the initial judgment that these incidents represent al-Qaeda failures. Based on media reports, the cell structure used by the plotters perhaps prevented infiltration (though it quickly led to their arrest once the plot unfolded), and the apparent lack of connection with radical elements in local Muslim communities might have blinded British authorities. Although British citizens of Pakistani origin have predominated in al-Qaeda-linked plots, some previous planners have originated from Algeria or East Africa.

Although the terrorists' explosives -- concocted with propane gas cylinders and tanks of gasoline -- failed this time, they would have had devastating results if successfully detonated, creating a fuel-air explosion with a potential power greater than conventional high explosives. Moreover, the London bombs were surrounded by nails to cause maximum injury to civilians.

Political and Legal Response

The incidents could also have been a baptism of fire for Prime Minister Brown, who had just announced his new cabinet in the hours preceding the discovery of the first bomb. Even so, British military commitment to Afghanistan and Iraq is expected to stay near the top of his political agenda. It was believed that he would deliberately diminish British support for the Bush administration to contrast himself with Blair. (Brown's senior ministers include two antiwar advocates.) The new prime minister must now consider whether any such move would be compared unfavorably with the political impact of the 2003 Madrid bombings, which gave the Socialists an electoral victory in Spain and led to the prompt withdrawal of Spanish troops from Iraq.

The British electorate has thus far reacted stoically to the events of the past few days, but involvement in Iraq is a controversial political issue, as is the nature of the terrorist threat. Avoiding the term "Muslim terrorists," the BBC has been reporting that those arrested are of "multiple Middle Eastern nationalities," with two described as "[South] Asian men" and none as "British-born or bred."

In terms of security, Brown has announced that the government will put enhanced security measures in place but has commented that now is "not a time for rushing into new legislation." In fact, he postponed a scheduled speech to the House of Commons in which he was planning to outline needed counterterrorism changes. Instead, he has tried to keep his focus on terrorism as a long-term threat, comparing the current struggle against violent Muslim extremists to the Cold War battles against communism. In an interview yesterday, Brown noted that defeating this type of terrorism requires not only a strong security component, but also a strong effort to win "hearts and minds."

Britain has passed significant counterterrorism legislation on four occasions since 2000: the Terrorism Act 2000, the Anti-terrorism, Crime, and Security Act 2001, the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005, and the Terrorism Act 2006. The government has been given far-reaching powers under these laws, including: the ability to impose "control orders" on terrorist suspects whom the government contends it cannot prosecute (a change made to accommodate the Law Lords' decision that Britain's indefinite detention regime was illegal); the right for police to conduct unlimited "stop-and-search" processes in London and other designated areas; and the criminalization of all activity relating to proscribed terrorist organizations.

Once the current media glare dies down, Brown is likely to push for additional legislative changes. For example, he has publicly supported extending the current twenty-eight-day period under which a terrorist suspect can be detained without charge, arguing that terrorist suspects frequently have "multiple identities, multiple addresses, and multiple points of contact with a terrorist organization," and that more time is often needed to investigate as a result. The system of control orders also needs to be reviewed. Several suspects under such orders have absconded, including one man associated with convicted terrorist Dhiren Barot, a Hindu convert to Islam sentenced to life in

prison in 2006 for planning attacks (including car bombings) in both Britain and the United States.

Brown is also being pressured by various conservative politicians to change British law in another area. Britain remains one of the only democracies in the world to ban the use of intercepted communications in court. There have been repeated proposals over the past ten years to relax this ban, which has remained in place due largely to vigorous opposition from British intelligence services worried about the full extent of their methods being revealed.

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