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Lessons and Indications from the UK Plot

*John Harrison **

5 July 2007

THE FOILED plot in London and the attack on Glasgow airport on the 29-30 June weekend offer several lessons and a warning for security services and terrorism analysis. Both incidents challenge some current assumptions, illustrate the difficulty of conducting terrorist operations, and may have opened a new form of aviation attack.

The attacks in the United Kingdom have forced us to reexamine two assumptions and perhaps confirm an existing theory. First, it appears that all of the identified suspects were foreign nationals who had only recently arrived in the UK. This information will cause a reexamination of the idea that the threat is primarily from the host community Muslims. This assumption still has validity, but as was seen with the recent plot against the JFK airport, we have to recognize that the imported terrorist poses a major threat. And unlike the earlier trends, this group appeared to want to establish a longer operational life cycle. The fact that the attack in London was not a suicide operation may have been to allow for the attack in Glasgow.

Emerging Profile

The emerging profile of the attackers is that of well-educated medical doctors. This should finally bury the notion that poverty causes terrorism. International terrorist organizations cannot conduct global operations with poor uneducated members. Insurgent groups, such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) require large numbers, and as they draw on a large rural population, they will have a high proportion of members in poverty. The profile of the latest UK attackers does support the theory that jihadi linked groups tend to draw heavily from the hard sciences. It appears that individuals who work in areas that have a binary world view -- it is either right or wrong -- are more susceptible to an ideology that shares this outlook. The two attackers who have been identified are both medical doctors working in UK hospitals.

Operationally, there is much public commentary on the direct tactical links to Iraq. Sir John Stevens, former head of the Metropolitan Police and advisor on terrorism to Prime Minister Brown, has even drawn a link from Bali to Baghdad to Glasgow. One must be careful in making this leap. It is clear that the tactics of using gas as a critical component in car bombs has been seen in Iraq. As a tactic it has a rather mixed record, one that was illustrated in the plots in the UK. It is clear that the use of incendiary devices is being advanced in Iraq, but incendiaries have been widely discussed in a range of jihadi publications for years. The knowledge is widespread given that groups across the ideological spectrum have used these types of bombs.

Message for Blair or Brown?

The timing of the attack has however created much discussion, with most commentators indicating it is either a farewell statement to Blair or a welcome reception for Gordon Brown. This of course may be the case, but it is not standard practice for the jihadi community to conduct operations based on western political cycles. The two occasions that this has happened -- the attack on the USS Cole and certainly Madrid -- have met with mixed results. So any linkage to the change in leadership in the UK is more likely to be coincidental.

The attack in the UK does illustrate how difficult conducting a terrorist operation actually can be. The cell does appear to have been well-funded; a Mercedes is an atypical choice for a car bomb and the cell had access to middle class housing. As none of the attackers conform to existing profiles, and did not have local support, they do not appear to have attracted the attention of the security services as likely terrorist suspects. Some had been involved in activities which had drawn the attention of the security services such as protests over the Danish caricatures of the Prophet. Even with these critical advantages, the plots were not successful. The bombs appear to have been put together in a rapid fashion, with little understanding of the impact of gas fumes on the driver. The cell made no effort to conceal their members' identities, mask their communications, or appear to have understood the security and surveillance situations in their area of operation. This is particularly odd given the fact that the cell was intending to conduct two attacks with the same members. None of this would matter of course if the cell had succeeded in the attack on Glasgow. The fact that they failed to successfully execute any of the attacks illustrates a poorly understood aspect of terrorism: they are human and are prone to all the same fallibilities facing the rest of humanity.

Far too often we are led to believe that terrorists are smarter and better skilled than the average person. They are exposed to a different skill set, and they are perhaps demonstrating a higher commitment to a cause than the average person, but they are still human. In this case they were operating in a hostile environment with no apparent local support for the cell and thus had to conceive of the plan, conduct surveillance, acquire materials, rehearse and then conduct the attack on targets more than 500 kilometres apart, relying on their own materials and knowledge. None of this is easy with local knowledge.

New Tactic

There is, however, one worrying new tactic. The attack on Glasgow Airport was a new methodology. To date we have not seen many attacks on airport terminals outside of war zones, and none in the Western world using a car bomb. If the plot had unfolded in the way the attackers intended, and there is some debate as to the actual possibility, the casualties could have been devastating. Imagine the impact on the industry if hundreds of passengers were killed on the ground waiting to check in. The aviation security system is designed to protect passengers while in the air. If the focus has shifted, we must face the reality that there is little that can be done to protect queuing passengers at the ticket counters or security screening points. The aviation industry may be in for some even more difficult times in the months ahead.

We need to remember that our society remains under threat. But we cannot respond to that threat if we are to remain free and open. We need to evaluate the risks and take necessary and appropriate precautions based on that assessment.

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