London: the intelligence shortfall

The most shocking image from July 7 last year was never intended by the bomber. They had planned to detonate all four bombs on the London Underground. But the closure of the King’s Cross station panicked one of the bombers into catching a No 30 bus, which then blew up in Tavistock Square.

It was that bus, with its roof ripped open like a sardine can, that became the symbol of the outrage, just as the plane exploding against the World Trade Centre became the iconic image of the New York attacks on September 11, 2001.

The fact that the other bombs went off deep under London, caught only in a few grainy photos on mobile phones, suggests a miscalculation by the bombers and their masters. Terrorists set out to spread terror and panic, by word and image. Somehow this didn’t seem to play too largely in the thinking of Mohammed Siddique Khan and his partners in crime.

There are still many mysteries about July 7, as there are about the failure of the would-be bombers a fortnight later on July 21. Discussion about the second incident is prevented by laws of contempt and sub judice in the run-up to the trial of the suspects.

Though Siddique Khan was evidently the leader of the July 7 bomb team, we know little about how and why the plot was hatched. Who was the real architect, and who managed the training, the logistics and the planning of how the bombs would be laid? It is possible the bombers may have been victims of self-deception; that they believed they would survive - they all bought return tickets when they took the train from Luton to London.

We know that Siddique Khan and Shehzad Tanweer had visited Pakistan and had contacts with Muslim extremist groups are hard to penetrate, writes ROBERT FOX on the first anniversary of the London bombings.
radical imams. Siddique Khan left a video tape in which he justified his actions in a mild Yorkshire accent: "Your democratically elected governments continually perpetrate atrocities against my people all over the world... We are at war and I am a soldier."

The tape was allegedly put out by the organisation of Ayman al Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden's lieutenant, suggesting the gang was part of al-Qaeda. But this doesn't quite add up. The tape seems to have been crudely cobbled together after the event, with different parts from different times spliced together.

We also know that Siddique Khan and Tanweer had been picked up by intelligence surveillance by MI5 and MI6. But the context of the surveillance remains far from clear, and the fact that they had been traced electronically does not mean much in itself, according to intelligence experts.

"It is very hard to say what this means unless you know a lot about who they are speaking to and why," said a Special Forces expert. "We are still very short on real information about some of the most extreme Muslim splinter groups and factions - they are hard to penetrate and there are almost no real informants."

Very few ethnic Asians and Muslims join the armed services - proportionally much fewer than from the Afro-Caribbean community - making it hard to recruit potential informants. As for surveillance, extremist cells have learned from organised crime to avoid the use of mobile phones, as they are too easy to monitor.

For some months the security services have been voicing fears about the possibility that some white Muslim converts could become suicide bombers and terrorists. In...

The bombs went off deep under London. Without the bus, there would have been no iconic image...
Iraq it is known that a Belgian woman convert to Islam blew herself up on a suicide mission. It is very hard to spot when a religious convert suddenly decides on terrorism as the ultimate act of their new faith. This is why MI5 is trawling for expertise in cultural behaviour as well as languages - and hence the frisson about a recent suggestion that their latest recruits may have been infiltrated by al-Qaeda.

Apart from the scale of the tragedy, what made London's 7/7 quite different from New York's 9/11 was public reaction. Comparatively speaking, there was little or no panic. According to Louise Richardson (right), an international terrorism expert at Harvard University, it was the reaction rather than the outrage itself that gave the 9/11 attacks their global impact.

Americans had witnessed destruction of human lives on one spot in one hour on a scale not witnessed in America since the big battles of the Civil War such as Gettysburg and Antietam. They no longer felt safe in their own homes, nor safe to travel in their own country. Their world had collapsed and so George Bush declared he would "rout terrorism from the world" and fight all evil-doers - a mission impossible this side of eternity.

Tony Blair, no stranger to the apocalyptic phrase on such occasions, instead stood before the television cameras on July 7 and said simply that all would be done to find out what had happened, to help the victims, and to find out who did it. That process continues.

It was the reaction to the 9/11 attacks that gave them their global impact, according to Louise Richardson.

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