

**Case 20: Bombing Transatlantic Airliners**

John Mueller

June 4, 2011

Four years after the event, former deputy secretary of homeland security James Loy argued that terrorists “nearly succeeded in blowing up seven planes crossing the Atlantic.”<sup>1</sup>

This widely-held proposition is simply preposterous. Most importantly, as Tyler Puhl documents, the London-based terrorist group, outraged at American and British incursions in the Middle East, that was planning the attack was under constant and extensive police surveillance throughout, including all their international communications, and it could be closed down at any time.

And there are other problems. It is not clear that, when authorities closed the plot down, the conspirators had anything like sufficient materials or effective bombs. Moreover, bomb-making was in the hands of a 28 year old dropout who is described by analyst Bruce Hoffman as “a loser with little ambition and few prospects.”<sup>2</sup> He was also in charge of creating the group’s “martyrdom videos” which are, as Puhl observes, “crudely shot.”

In addition, the plot required two terrorist bombers per plane, and at the time, notes Puhl, “the inner circle” of the plot contained only three people, though of course more could eventually have been brought in from those on the periphery who were at the time still in the dark about the full nature of the plot. As this suggests, there was nothing imminent about the plot, a conclusion that is reinforced by the facts that no tickets had been bought, that no dry runs had been made, that no bombs had been tested, and that many of the conspirators did not possess passports that would have allowed them to board the planes—as Puhl documents, it routinely takes six weeks to obtain one in the United Kingdom.

Also relevant is the “sophistication,” that is, the complexity, of the plot.<sup>3</sup> The 9/11 plotters succeeded in considerable part because of the simplicity of their plot, not because of its complexity or sophistication. The notion that none of the bombs, created by a “loser,” would prove be duds is, to say the least questionable, as is the notion that all of the amateurs (few, if any, of which had been undergone any training at the time) would be successful in detonating them—particularly given the failed efforts by the shoe and underwear bombers (Cases 1 and 33).

<sup>1</sup> James Loy, “Al-Qaeda’s undimmed threat,” *Washington Post*, November 7, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Hoffman, “Radicalization and Subversion: Al Qaeda and the 7 July 2005 Bombings and the 2006 Airline Bombing Plot,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, September 2009, 1107

<sup>3</sup> As Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff repeatedly characterized it on the day of the arrests: “This was a very sophisticated plan and operation...The conception, the large number of people involved, the sophisticated design of the devices that were being considered, and the sophisticated nature of the plan all suggest that this group that came together to conspire was very determined and very skilled and very capable...[T]his was a plot that is certainly about as sophisticated as any we’ve seen in recent years, as far as terrorism is concerned.” Quoted, Ashley Lohmann, “Jihad on Main Street: Explaining the Threat of Jihadist Terrorism to the American Homeland Since 9/11,” Honors Program for International Security Studies, Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, May 18, 2010, 38-39. Although Lohmann considers the plot to be a “serious” one, she also finds it “unclear” whether the plotters “received top-notch training” (77).

There is also the almost impossible problem of simultaneity. If one bomb were to go off in one airliner restroom (the detonation venue decided on by the plotters), all other airliners aloft and on the ground would likely be immediately alerted in the post-9/11 and post-shoe bomb era. This would render replications nearly impossible, particularly by dark skinned people. As Puhl also notes, an airliner does not necessarily crash when its fuselage is breached,<sup>4</sup> and moreover the notion promulgated that thousands would be killed on the ground if the planes were attacked over cities does not survive sensible analysis.

At the time there were understandable concerns that there might be other people connected to the plot in the UK or possibly even in the United States that the police did not know about. That concern has happily proven to be unfounded, but nonetheless American airports remained on elevated, that is "orange," alert for years after the event. There are suggestions that it cost the Los Angeles airport alone \$100,000 per day to be on orange rather than on the more normal yellow alert.<sup>5</sup> However, when I asked the head of security at one airport what he would do differently if the alert level was lowered from orange to yellow, he said he didn't know.

---

<sup>4</sup> See also John Mueller and Mark Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money: Balancing the Risks, Costs, and Benefits of Homeland Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), ch. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Sara Kehaulani Goo, "Going the Extra Mile," *Washington Post*, April 9, 2004.

## Case 20: Bombing Transatlantic Airliners

Tyler Puhl

June 4, 2011

typographical and other minor corrections November 21, 2011

### 1. Overview

On August 9, 2006,<sup>1</sup> 24 British citizens were arrested in connection with a conspiracy to blow up transatlantic flights with liquid chemical bombs smuggled on board. If the ambitious plot had been successful, the loss of life would have been devastating: the death toll could have been enormous with perhaps 2,700 people perishing and could have had a bigger impact than 9/11 on society and international relations.<sup>2</sup>

The plan was to mix liquid chemical bombs using ingredients that can be bought virtually anywhere, then mix the homemade solution with detonating substances that would create an explosion to bring down the plane. The men planned, it appears, to bring down seven planes all departing from Heathrow airport in London to major cities in the United States and Canada. The plotters also had a connection to the terrorist network al-Qaeda, to questionable Islamic charitable organizations, and to some in the lawless region around the Pakistani-Afghan border, and some of these may have provided logistical and ideological support.

However, no matter how serious the plot, the men had essentially no chance of pulling off the attack. They were under close watch by British, American, and Pakistani authorities in an enormous multi-year and multi-million dollar operation that was capable of closing it down at any time.

Of the 24 arrested, only 15 were charged, and of those fifteen, only eight went to trial.<sup>3</sup> Three, Abdullah Ahmed Ali (the plot's ringleader), Assad Sarwar, and Tanvir Hussain, were convicted of conspiring to activate bombs disguised as drinks and for conspiracy to commit murder. Three others, Ibrahim Savant, Arafat Khan, and Waheed Zaman were convicted of conspiracy to commit murder.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Adam Khatib was convicted of conspiring with Ali to blow up commercial aircraft, Nabeel Hussain was convicted of acts preparatory to terrorism, and Mohammed Shamin Uddin was convicted of possessing a document likely to be used by terrorists.<sup>5</sup>

### 2. Nature of the adversary

The arrested were all British-born Muslims, who resided in the cities of Birmingham, Buckinghamshire, and East London, and who were between the

---

<sup>1</sup> The arrest date varies from August 9 and August 10 because the arrests were made before and after midnight.

<sup>2</sup> Sandra Laville, Richard Norton-Taylor, and Vikram Dodd, "A plot to commit murder on an unimaginable scale," *Guardian*, August 11, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Germain Difo, "Ordinary Measures, Extraordinary Results: An Assessment of Foiled Plots Since 9/11," American Security Project, May 2010.

<sup>4</sup> "Would-be suicide bombers jailed for life," BBC, July 12, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Sean O'Neill, "Bomb plot leader's friends convicted of terror offences," *Times*, December 10, 2009.

ages of 17 and 36 at the time of the arrest.<sup>6</sup> While they were not all lifelong friends and family members (some were),<sup>7</sup> most of those arrested are second- or third-generation British citizens hailing from the war-torn Kashmir region of Pakistan.<sup>8</sup>

It is difficult to pigeon hole the men into a specific terrorist profile. Some were politically, socially, and economically disadvantaged, while others were successful or promising members of British society.

The plotters could be unofficially divided into two groups based on their apparent levels of participation in the planning, preparations, and potential execution of the plot. Those in the inner circle (Ali, Sarwar, and Hussain as well as a man in Pakistan, Rashid Rauf) planned the attacks and most were willing to participate in them. Those in the outer circle (such as Savant, Khan, Zaman, Khatib and Nabeel Hussain) were not really informed of the attack plans, but provided logistical support to the mission including purchasing supplies, renting apartments, and transferring money to the inner cell. While both groups had been preparing for the attack for six months, not all members may even have known of the others' existence.<sup>9</sup>

Abdullah Ahmed Ali, the apparent ringleader<sup>10</sup> hardly conformed to the stereotype of the wild-eyed, fanatical, homicidal suicide bomber. Aged 27 at the time of the arrests, he was the son of a first generation immigrant family from Pakistan. Though unemployed,<sup>11</sup> he attained a bachelor's degree in computer science engineering from a respectable British university,<sup>12</sup> and had a wife, Cossar Ali,<sup>13</sup> and a young son. In his young adulthood, prior to graduating and starting a family, however, he started to develop an Islamic militancy, in which he praised the Taliban's model society and wanted *sharia* law enacted in Britain. He may have been radicalized by older students who watched videos of the killing and mistreatment of Muslims in Bosnia and Chechnya with him.<sup>14</sup>

Assad Ali Sarwar was a 28 year old university dropout and is described by Bruce Hoffman as "A loser with little ambition and few prospects who is thus

---

<sup>6</sup> "Who are the terror plot suspects," BBC, August 11, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> There were 3 sets of brothers arrested (Hussains, Raufs, and Khans). Khuram Ali Shazan and Assad Ali Sarwar worked at a car trading dealership together (see Focus: Terror in the Skies). Abdullah Ahmed Ali and Tanvir Hussain (see Bruce Hoffman, "Radicalization and Subversion: Al Qaeda and the 7 July 2005 Bombings and the 2006 Airline Bombing Plot," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, September 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Brian Bennett and Douglas Waller, "Thwarting the Airline Plot: Inside the Investigation," *Time*, August 10, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Carrick Mollenkamp, Chip Cummins, David Crawford, and Robert Block, "U.K. Terror Plot Points to New Threat," *Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 2006. This article provides great insight into thought in the days following arrests as it explores the planning, group, motivations and policing of the foiled plot.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon Corera, "Bomb Plot—the al-Qaeda connection," BBC, September 9, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Don Van Natta Jr., Elaine Sciolino and Stephen Grey, "Details Emerge in British Terror Case," *New York Times*, August 28, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> Hoffman, "Radicalization and Subversion," 1106.

<sup>13</sup> "Cossar Ali found not guilty of failing to pass on airline bomb plot information," *Times*, March 5, 2010. She was arrested on suspicion of having knowledge of the terrorist attack from her husband, but was never charged with any operational connection to the execution of the attack.

<sup>14</sup> Hoffman, "Radicalization and Subversion," 1106-1107.

prime cannon-fodder for a terrorist movement looking for someone who himself is looking for some purpose or meaning for his life.”<sup>15</sup> Married, he travelled to Pakistan several times for charity work. During a charity mission to Pakistan in 2002, he met Ali and over the next couple of years they met and discussed UK foreign policy and its involvement in the Middle East. In Sarwar’s description, Ali had the characteristics of a leader, compared to his own weak character.<sup>16</sup>

Tanvir Hussain, aged 25 at the time of the arrest, described himself as a drug user and womanizer in college, but in 2005 he reinvented himself as a devout Muslim. Before the arrests, he was described as Ali’s right-hand man and was extremely loyal.<sup>17</sup>

Rashid Rauf, 25, arrested at the same time in Pakistan, was never in the UK during the planning,<sup>18</sup> but played a vital part in the advancement of the plot due to his connection to al-Qaeda. He has had extensive connection to many senior ranking al-Qaeda officials and operators, and was in daily contact with the plotters in Britain.<sup>19</sup> In a bizarre 2002 incident, he had fled Britain for Pakistan. He was wanted by police for questioning over the stabbing death of his uncle in Birmingham on his way home from work.<sup>20</sup> No motive has ever found for the murder.<sup>21</sup>

### 3. Motivation

The transatlantic plotters were motivated particularly by Western foreign policy in the Middle East, focusing on the involvement of the US and UK in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as on those country’s protection of Israel. By attacking the West, they felt that they were achieving justice for past atrocities committed by Western countries and that they were defending Islam.

Authorities were given insight into the member’s motivations by a set of martyrdom digital videos that explained the reasons for the attacks.<sup>22</sup> These were recorded by Assad Sarwar and were recovered after the arrests were made,<sup>23</sup> although MI5 had followed and recorded the men for three months<sup>24</sup> including the period when the tapes were being made.<sup>25</sup> Six of the men recorded seven martyr videos,<sup>26</sup> performing in front a black sheet, with some of them wearing headscarves and black robes but showing their faces. These tapes contained some Arabic words, as well as some inaudible sounds, but the vast majority of the

<sup>15</sup> Hoffman, “Radicalization and Subversion,” 1107.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Walker and Vikram Dodd, “Video tirades seal case against liquid bomb plot,” *Guardian*, September 9, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> “Airliner bomb pilot: Profiles,” *Guardian*, September 7, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Though his exact whereabouts were unknown, it is widely suspected that Rauf was in Pakistan.

<sup>19</sup> NEFA Foundation, “Bojinka II: The Transatlantic Liquid Bomb Plot,” April 2008, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Ian Cobain and Matthew Weaver, “Rashid Rauf,” *Guardian*, November 22, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Ian Cobain, “The mysterious disappearance of an alleged terrorist mastermind,” *Guardian*, January 8, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Hoffman, “Radicalization and Subversion,” 1105.

<sup>23</sup> Walker and Dodd, “Video Tirades.”

<sup>24</sup> The three months MI5 investigated the men in operation Overt were May, June and July, and arrests were made on August 9, 2006.

<sup>25</sup> Walker and Dodd, “Video Tirades.”

<sup>26</sup> Van Natta, Sciolino and Grey, “Details Emerge.”

language spoken was English, making the concept of killing Westerners especially ironic or peculiar.<sup>27</sup>

Ali's rhetoric and wording in his martyrdom tape are quite frightening. Interestingly though, he does not open his argument by berating Western countries or defending Muslim lands. Instead, he says he is doing this because of the rewards Allah has promised for himself, his family, and those close to him. Then he states that he also wants to punish and humiliate his enemies. To Ali, Muslims are people of honor and are brave, not cowardly. Ali shows admiration for Osama bin Laden when he reminds the viewer that "Sheikh Osama warned you many times to leave our lands or you will be destroyed, and now the time has come for you to be destroyed."<sup>28</sup> It is strange that his opening is about himself and about personal gains since these could be viewed as a lessening of his commitment as a martyr to the cause. He also identifies Westerners as enemies and killers, but then quickly notes that Muslims are still capable of defending themselves through retaliatory measures. By referencing bin Laden, one of the men responsible for the worst terrorist attack in history, and by stating that "*now* is the time for you to be destroyed," he could be interpreted as suggesting that an attack is imminent.

In many other terrorist groups, a charismatic leader may be the motivation for many to join and carry out the attacks.<sup>29</sup> As noted earlier, Sarwar viewed Ali as having leading characteristics, while Sarwar viewed himself to have a "weak character."<sup>30</sup> Through this admiration of Ali, it is possible that Ali may have had a hand in radicalizing Sarwar and convincing him, as well as others, that this attack would be justified. In his video, Tanvir Hussain echoed Ali's sentiment that such operations should be done "again and again until people come to their senses and realize, don't mess with Muslims."<sup>31</sup>

None spoke of their hatred of Western ideals. It appears that most of those involved focused on problems with American or British foreign policy in the Middle East which constituted, as one of the tapes puts it, waging "war against Muslims."<sup>32</sup> Some terrorists and groups may be motivated by their sheer hatred of democracy, freedom, and liberty: however, the men on these tapes were looking for retribution for what they felt were appalling policies in the Middle East that were, "trying to humiliate, kill us and destroy us."<sup>33</sup>

There is no mention anywhere on the tapes of the plot itself.

#### 4. Goals

---

<sup>27</sup> Walker and Dodd, "Video Tirades." Some of the words in the tapes are inaudible or in another language, which makes it difficult to attain a direct quotation. Excerpts from the tapes can be viewed on the same webpage as Walker and Dodd's "Video Tirades."

<sup>28</sup> Hoffman, "Radicalization and Subversion," 1105.

<sup>29</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, 14-15.

<sup>30</sup> Walker and Dodd, "Video Tirades."

<sup>31</sup> Walker and Dodd, "Video Tirades."

<sup>32</sup> Don Van Natta Jr., Elaine Sciolino and Stephen Grey, "In Tapes, Receipts and a Diary, Details of the British Terror Case," *New York Times*, August 28, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Hoffman, "Radicalization and Subversion," 1105.

The plotters' motivations are clear, but the goals they hoped to accomplish with their martyrdom are much more vague. That is, none of the six men<sup>34</sup> taped mentioned what specific achievement would be accomplished by their terrorist act.<sup>35</sup> However, it seems clear from the tapes that the goal of the transatlantic plot was to inflict pain upon the West by expressing their outrage at what the plotters viewed as political wrongdoing in foreign policy and by obtaining a degree of revenge against Westerners for these injustices. The conspirators' aim was not to just kill British or American citizens aboard planes and exert pressure to change Middle Eastern policy, but also to demonstrate to the world that Muslim lands are not to be disturbed by outsiders.

However, in recent history a massive terrorist attack does not cause Western powers to leave a region, but draws them in, as we have seen in the years following 9/11. So, it could be seen as counterproductive for transatlantic plotters to attack innocent Western civilians aboard commercial aircrafts and expect the US and others to leave the Middle East.

The crudely shot tapes are filled with an-eye-for-an-eye rhetoric: "as you bomb, you will be bombed; as you kill, you will be killed."<sup>36</sup> This type of statement lends credibility to the arguments made above. The suspects are looking to show their resolve in the face of increasing Western presence and influence in the regions their families hail from, and the plotters are eager to see this recent phenomena disappear by whatever means necessary, even martyrdom.

Ali gives the West an ultimatum. "Stop meddling in our affairs and we will leave you alone, otherwise expect floods of martyr operations against you and we will take our revenge and anger."<sup>37</sup> This sort of rhetoric suggests there was a political outcome expected by the would-be attackers. This statement would not have been uttered if they only wanted a lot of Americans and the Britons to die indiscriminately. The conspirators presumably hoped that their deed would cause a rethinking of foreign policy in the Middle East by the US and UK.

Tanvir Hussain's martyrdom tape provided information about his desire to show Muslim resolve in defending their lands: "I only wish I could come back and do this again...until people come to their senses and realize, don't mess with Muslims." In similar vein, Ali says "we will teach them a lesson they will never forget is that we, the Muslims, are people of honor...we are brave, we're not cowards and enough is enough." Thus, Hussain and Ali are trying to forcefully persuade Western powers to exit the Middle East, and are trying to show tenacity for their commitment to Islam. By carrying out this attack, Islamic concerns would be taken much more seriously, if the attackers had their way.

After the arrests, however, the group claimed its goal was to make a documentary about the unfairness of the West, stating that they never meant to hurt anyone and that the tapes were made as spoofs created to make the movie more provocative. The documentary, it was argued, would be used to protest

---

<sup>34</sup> Van Natta, Sciolino and Grey, "In Receipts."

<sup>35</sup> Walker and Dodd, "Video Tirades."

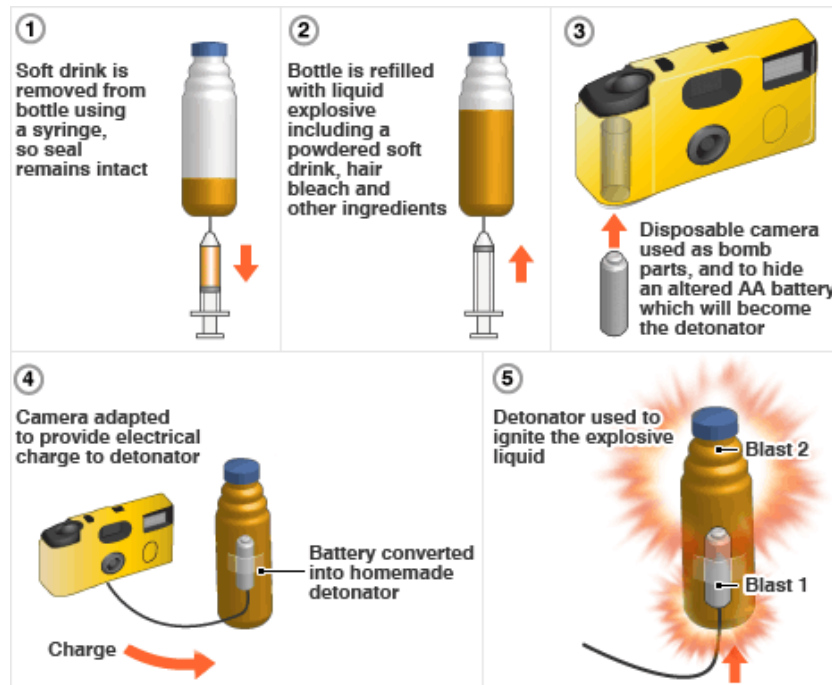
<sup>36</sup> NEFA, "Bojinka II."

<sup>37</sup> Hoffman, "Radicalization and Subversion," 1105.

British policies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon.<sup>38</sup> This defense obviously proved futile.

### 5. Plans for violence

The means to be employed in the terrorist act were as sophisticated as they were simple.<sup>39</sup> The bombs, to be detonated in midflight, would be homemade and each bomber would carry the necessary products needed to create and detonate them.<sup>40</sup>



The plotters would use 500ml bottles of the popular British energy drinks, Lucozade and Oasis, as the bomb capsule. As the diagram shows, the drink would be taken out through a syringe,<sup>41</sup> used so as to not tamper with the factory sealed top of the drink.<sup>42</sup>

The mixture was likely to be handled by Sarwar. During the trial, the “loser” Sarwar is said to have demonstrated knowledge and skill in concentrating hydrogen peroxide to levels that were appropriate for a destructive bomb.<sup>43</sup> Next, the homemade explosive mixture was to be injected into the bottle prior to boarding the flight. If the explosive mixture did not match the original color of the contents in the energy drink, food dye would have been added.<sup>44</sup> The key, though, is that the liquids must be able to pass through airport security, so these ingredients should be commercially available.<sup>45</sup> The main ingredient in the

<sup>38</sup> Hines, “Terror mastermind guilty.”

<sup>39</sup> Hoffman, “Radicalization and Subversion,” 1105.

<sup>40</sup> “Airliners Plot: The Allegations,” BBC, April 3, 2008.

<sup>41</sup> From “Three guilty of airline bomb plot,” BBC, September 7, 2009.

<sup>42</sup> Vikram Dodd, “The drink that could have downed a plane” *Guardian*, September 7, 2009. Dodd’s article provides immense insight in the exact planning and execution of the attack on commercial airlines. Nuance and details are provided with great understanding.

<sup>43</sup> Dodd, “Drink.”

<sup>44</sup> Richard Edwards and Duncan Gardham, “Airline terror plot: The bomb-making plan,” *Telegraph*, April 3, 2008.

<sup>45</sup> Hoffman, “Radicalization and Subversion,” 1105.



mixture would be hydrogen peroxide<sup>46</sup> mixed with other organic materials. To increase the power of the explosion, the sugary drink Tang was to be added.<sup>47</sup>

When the mixture in the bottle is complete with hydrogen peroxide and other organic materials, the terrorist would detonate it: the camera was to be connected to bottle and the electrical charge would cause an explosion. This would be done in the plane bathroom to prevent suspicion from crewmembers or passengers. It is not completely clear why the explosion was to occur in the bathroom, when one would think it might be easier to detonate the bomb from a passenger seat without arousing suspicion. The detonating substance in the plan was HMTD<sup>48</sup> (hexamethylene triperoxide diamine) concealed in hollowed out 1.5-volt AA batteries which could be placed into any electronic device allowed onto a plane. HMTD is an organic chemical compound that could be made from “household and commercial ingredients that are freely available,” including solid fuel camping stoves.<sup>49</sup> A small tail lead was supposed to connect the adapted battery (now in the mixture) to an electric power source, in this case a disposable digital camera.<sup>50</sup>

The group had several diversions and distractions to increase their chances of getting on their assigned flights. First, the teams were going to travel in duos in order to separate the bomb materials carried on and to give each other support.<sup>51</sup> If something were to happen to one of the men in the security process of the airport, Ali wanted to require all men have two bottles on them in case their partner was compromised or caught. This would have required 14 suicide bombers to down seven planes, and Ali’s team at the time of the arrests was not nearly this large—most of the group was rather peripheral to the plot.

Ali also had plans to make the would-be killers look like regular men: they should carry pornographic magazines and condoms on to the plane to ensure the security personnel did not think they were religious zealots.<sup>52</sup> Ali went even as far to suggest that he bring his 2-year-old son with him on the flight so as to not arouse suspicion.<sup>53</sup>

Police believe plans were first drawn up during Ali’s several trips to the lawless region on the border of Pakistan and Afghanistan,<sup>54</sup> but it is unclear whether the idea came from Ali or an al-Qaeda member in Pakistan. The plan was

---

<sup>46</sup> Dodd, “Drink.” Terrorists use hydrogen peroxide extensively because of its ability to cause destruction and ease of attaining it. However, it must be concentrated in order to have a destructive effect that terrorist’s desire.

<sup>47</sup> Transportation Security Administration, “UK Liquid Explosives Plot Trial Overview,” September 7, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> There were a lot of conflicting reports initially after the arrests. However, in the trial the prosecution claimed the plotters used HMTD as an explosive as opposed to TATP and reports by the TSA and the *Guardian* confirm these allegations. So, I will assume that the HMTD was the primary explosive.

<sup>49</sup> Edwards and Gardham, “Bomb-making plot.”

<sup>50</sup> Dodd, “Drink.”

<sup>51</sup> Sebastian Rotella, “Britain Looks for Links to Transit Blasts,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 15, 2006.

<sup>52</sup> TSA, “UK Trial.”

<sup>53</sup> Hoffman, “Radicalization and Subversion,” 1106.

<sup>54</sup> Hines, “Terror mastermind.”

finalized during a trip to Pakistan in 2005, according to counter-terrorism officials.<sup>55</sup> It is alleged that Ali and the planners of the July 7, 2005 and the failed July 21, 2005 attacks were all in Pakistan around the same time in 2004, and they all returned with hydrogen peroxide-based bombing plans that were not used before in the UK.<sup>56</sup>

In order to carry out the plot, Ali would need help, and he set about recruiting long-standing friends, associates at mosques, and others referred by al-Qaeda.<sup>57</sup> Many were assigned specific roles in the preparation and practice in the attacks. The biggest role in this case is by Sarwar, who was in charge of the bomb making<sup>58</sup> and of purchasing material for the bombs,<sup>59</sup> as well as video taping the martyrdom videos.<sup>60</sup>

Ali's apartment was purchased, in cash, for \$250,000 in June of 2005, and it became the venue for a bomb-making factory<sup>61</sup> and the recording of the martyrdom tapes.<sup>62</sup> While Ali was living in the apartment he codified his plans in his handwritten diary. During the trial, pages from this contained incriminating evidence about the planning and execution of the plot, as well as the clever bits about getting through airport security by carrying pornographic magazines and condoms.<sup>63</sup>

Immediately after the arrests, reports on the number of planes to be blown up by Ali and his men gave widely conflicting numbers, from six by the *Wall Street Journal* all the way up to twelve by Times Online.<sup>64</sup> In the months that followed, investigators found evidence on a computer memory stick belonging to Ali that indicated Ali had identified seven flights from four different airlines that he wanted to attack, all leaving from Heathrow Airport in London: Air Canada, American Airlines, and United Airlines flights to San Francisco, Toronto, Montreal, Washington D.C., and New York City, as well as two to Chicago.<sup>65</sup> These were all large planes with a lot of passengers and crewmembers. The timing of these flights was key because if they wanted to bring down multiple planes, they would have to be in the air around the same time because, if one plane went down, most other planes would be kept on the ground, while authorities could do little to save the other planes once they were up in the air.<sup>66</sup> The flights listed above all took off within two hours and thirty-five minutes of each other, which would have made it impossible for authorities on the ground to directly intervene.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> "Airline Bomb Plot Profiles," *Telegraph*, September 7, 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Corera, "al-Qaeda connection."

<sup>57</sup> "Airline Bomb Plot Profiles."

<sup>58</sup> TSA, "UK Trial."

<sup>59</sup> Hoffman, "Radicalization and Subversion," 1107.

<sup>60</sup> Hoffman, "Radicalization and Subversion," 1107.

<sup>61</sup> NEFA, "Bojinka II," 7.

<sup>62</sup> Hoffman, "Radicalization and Subversion," 1107.

<sup>63</sup> TSA, "UK Trial."

<sup>64</sup> NEFA, "Bohinka II," 3.

<sup>65</sup> "Airliner's Plot: The Allegations."

<sup>66</sup> TSA, "UK Trial."

<sup>67</sup> Duncan Gardham, "Airline terror trial: The bomb plot to kill 10,000 people," *Telegraph*, September 7, 2009.

These large planes (777, 767 or 763 jets) were carrying between 241 and 285 each.<sup>68</sup> Some analysts and reports estimated that the attacks could have led to thousands of more deaths if the planes were brought down over American cities.<sup>69</sup> The plotters had considered the possibility of expanding the attack to 18 suicide bombers on 9 planes, a circumstance that, Duncan Gardham estimates, “could have led to 5,000 deaths in the air and as many on the ground.”<sup>70</sup>

Commercial aviation was not the only target researched by the London terrorist group. During the trial, the prosecution characterized their ambitions as “limitless,”<sup>71</sup> noting that they were considering other attacks against British infrastructure: power plants, including nuclear power stations, in Britain; gas and oil refineries in Bacton, Fawley, Coreeton, and Kingsbury; the country’s national electricity grid; London’s Canary Wharf office complex; a gas pipeline between Britain and Belgium; Heathrow Airport’s new control tower; and industrial facilities that store and process hydrogen peroxide.<sup>72</sup>

Many have been skeptical of the feasibility of the airline plot and believe that these men were not capable of pulling off an attack like this.

To begin with, the terrorist attack was not imminent in some respects. No tickets had been purchased, and some of the plotters did not even have passports.<sup>73</sup> It takes around six weeks to attain a new passport, while it is three weeks for a renewal of a passport and both are accompanied by an interview from Identity and Passport Service.<sup>74</sup> Concerns that the plot might be imminent had to be taken seriously, however, because the audio surveillance the British were using in the apartment of Ali indicated that Sarwar was disposing of a large number of hydrogen peroxide bottles at a recycling site, suggesting that preparations and experimenting may have been undertaken.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, when asked what the time frame was by a conspirator, Ali responded by saying, “a couple of weeks.”<sup>76</sup> With this information, authorities had to act and make arrests. In particular, President George W. Bush urged Pakistan to arrest Rashid Rauf, an action that prompted all other arrests, once this surveillance intelligence had reached the White House.

Some of the skeptical conclusions were made without full information. Many thought that TATP would be used as the explosive, and this requires a lot of expertise to mix and detonate. However, the plotters were using HMTD, a much

---

<sup>68</sup> “Airliner’s Plot: The Allegations.”

<sup>69</sup> There is a discrepancy to whether the terrorists planned to bring the planes down over land or over the Atlantic Ocean. NEFA quotes Mark Mershon, Special Agent in Charge of the FBI’s New York Field Office as saying, “the plan was [to] bring them down over U.S. cities, not over the ocean.” Meanwhile, the TSA report of the trial claims that, “The liquid explosives would have been detonated while flying over the Atlantic Ocean.”

<sup>70</sup> Gardham, “Plot to kill 10,000.”

<sup>71</sup> Richard Edwards, Gordon Rayner and Duncan Gardham, “Terror suspects planned nuclear station strike,” *Telegraph*, April 4, 2008.

<sup>72</sup> Hoffman, “Radicalization and Subversion,” 1106.

<sup>73</sup> Patrick Smith, “Ask the Pilot,” Salon.com, September 15, 2006.

<sup>74</sup> “Timetable for Passport Applications,” Identity and Passport Services UK.

<sup>75</sup> Dominic Casciani, “Liquid bomb plot: What happened,” BBC, September 9, 2008.

<sup>76</sup> Duncan Gardham, “Airline bomb plot: investigation one of the biggest since WWII,” *Telegraph*, September 8, 2009.

easier and less dangerous mixture to detonate. Additionally, as noted, Sarwar showed extensive skill in working with hydrogen peroxide during the trial.<sup>77</sup>

Many thought the explosion would be insufficient to down the planes. The BBC investigated this notion by inviting explosives engineer, Sidney Alford, to detonate a HMTD bomb on a decommissioned aircraft on the ground. A massive hole was blown in the stationary plane, but Alford also said there are many problems that could have played a part in assembling and detonating the bomb, so if Ali and his men boarded the planes with bomb making materials, it would not necessarily yield death for all aboard.<sup>78</sup> This is because a successful bombing does not necessarily imply that the plane would crash. In 2008, an oxygen cylinder exploded on a Qantas flight from Hong Kong blasting a six-foot hole in the fuselage, depressurizing the plane, but it still returned safely to Hong Kong.<sup>79</sup> In 1989, a cargo door opened on a United Airlines flight heading across the Pacific, extensively damaging the fuselage and cabin structure adjacent to the door. Nine passengers were sucked out and lost at sea, but the plane was able to land in Honolulu.<sup>80</sup> These examples show that extensive damage to a fuselage, while dangerous and deadly, does not automatically yield a catastrophic crash and hundreds of lives lost.

There were also potential problems with simultaneity. After the first bomb goes off all, passengers and crew on other planes, especially ones coming from Heathrow, would be on instant alert, making it far harder to assemble and detonate a bomb inconspicuously. This is what happened on the fourth flight on 9/11. Passengers were informed via cell phone conversations with family members that other planes had been hijacked and were crashed into significant government and economic buildings prompting them to revolt and force a crash landing into an empty field.<sup>81</sup>

There are also problems with the notion that if the planes had been detonated over land, there would be many casualties on the ground. In 1988, a plane was brought down over Lockerbie, Scotland, a city of more than 4,000 people, yet only eleven were killed on the ground.<sup>82</sup> Another, more recent example is a plane crash in a suburb of Buffalo, New York, in which only one man on the ground was killed.<sup>83</sup> The best example probably comes from an Airbus A300 crash in the Queens borough of New York, an area with a population density of around 20,000 per square mile, in which only five were

---

<sup>77</sup> Vikram Dodd, "The drink that could have downed a plane," *Guardian*, September 7, 2009.

<sup>78</sup> "Three guilty of airline plot," BBC, September 7, 2009.

<sup>79</sup> "Depressurization—475 km north-west of Manila, Philippines—25 July 2008", ATSP Transport Safety Report, Aviation Occurrence Investigation AO-2008-053 Interim Factual No. 2, Australian Transport Safety Bureau, Australian Government, November 2009.

<sup>80</sup> Craig Skehan, "Valve in Oxygen Cylinder the Culprit of 747 Explosion", *The Age*, July 29, 2008.

<sup>81</sup> Susan Sward, "The voice of the survivors," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 21, 2002.

<sup>82</sup> M. M. Charles, "Aircraft Accident Report No 2/90 (EW/C1094)," Department of Transportation, December 21, 1988.

<sup>83</sup> Doug Alexander and Chris Dolmetsch, "Continental Plane Reported Icing Before Crashing," Bloomberg News, February 19, 2009.

killed on the ground.<sup>84</sup> This evidence leads one to believe that even if the plotters had decided to crash the planes over land, then there would not have been the massive number of casualties estimated by some analysts.

Most of the above claims are hypothetical in that they assume what would have happened had the plotters been able to board the plane. However, here was no chance of this happening due to British counterterrorism work. Working from tips, British authorities British domestic security services had the group thoroughly under surveillance, bugging their apartments, tapping their phones, monitoring their bank transactions, eavesdropping on their internet traffic and e-mail messages, even watching where they traveled, shopped and took their laundry. In a secret search before the August 10 raids, agents had discovered that would-be terrorists had scooped out the insides of batteries and there was evidence of chemical experiments.<sup>85</sup>

The investigation used all available British resources. However, Ali sensed he was being watched and started having his meetings in public places to make it more difficult for security agents to monitor their target. However, a breakthrough was made on July 26 when audio and visual surveillance was set up in Ali's apartment. Authorities overheard Ali and his cohorts discuss North American targets, hydrogen peroxide, and other incriminating issues. Action was taken when American President George W. Bush received the intelligence briefing that the plotters had set up a timetable of a few weeks and Bush ordered the arrest of Rashid Rauf. Since the plotters in Britain were in daily contact with Rauf, this forced the British hand, and counterterrorism arrested 24 people whom they thought were connected.<sup>86</sup>

## 6. Role of informants

There is only one report that suggests an undercover British agent infiltrated Ali's group. This information was only stated by U.S. officials however, not British ones.<sup>87</sup> This was the extent of information disseminated about the role of informants.

In this case, the extensive investigation that British authorities had underway may have resulted in the lack of need for informants. The security operation that officially started in May of 2006, was led by police and MI5, who carried out more than a year of surveillance before the terrorist group was arrested.<sup>88</sup> During the operation, authorities heard the terrorists discuss smuggling bombs onto a plane, making martyrdom videos, and talking of hydrogen peroxide.<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> "NTSB Press Release," *NTSB News*, October 26, 2004. The official title of the press release: NTSB says pilot's excessive rudder pedal inputs led to crash of American flight 587; Airbus rudder system design and elements of airline's pilot training program contributed.

<sup>85</sup> Van Natta, Sciolino and Grey, "In Receipts."

<sup>86</sup> Gardham, "WWII." The paragraph derives from Gardham's extremely detailed work.

<sup>87</sup> "Agent infiltrated terror cell," CNN, August 10, 2006.

<sup>88</sup> "Hunt for Rashid Rauf that ended with hellfire," *Sunday Times*, November 23, 2008.

<sup>89</sup> Duncan Gardham, "Airline Bomb Plot: investigation 'one of biggest since WW2'," *Telegraph*, September 8, 2009.

In many other cases of terrorism, counterterrorism officials have an entire network of informants and infiltrators. Why did British and American media outlets have so little to say about the function of informants and infiltrators in foiling this plot? Essentially, there are two reasons that an insufficient amount of information is available. First, during criminal trials, and especially criminal trials involving terrorism, the British are notoriously reserved so as not to sway the mind of the jurors. In addition, if an investigation is still pending, the prosecution cannot enter new evidence that jeopardizes the investigation. Hoffman views this as a reason for the lack of convictions in the first trial. He believes that the prosecution was severely hampered by this procedure in this case because extremely valuable evidence was not admissible.<sup>90</sup>

## 7. Connections

The plotters had three connections of concern: the relation of Ali and his men to Islamic charity and service groups, to the country of Pakistan, and, most importantly, to al-Qaeda. These may have increased the plotters' ideological commitment and logistical capabilities during the months of planning.

Tablighi Jamaat is a Pakistani-based missionary organization that ties several individuals from this plot together.<sup>91</sup> TJ has come under fire in recent years because of its connection with terrorism. The FBI's Michael Heimbach, deputy chief of the FBI's international terrorism section, went so far as to say, "We have a significant presence of Tablighi Jamaat in the United States, and we have found that Al Qaeda used them for recruiting, now and in the past."<sup>92</sup> The notion that there is a clear connection between TJ and Islamic terrorism needs to be addressed. The plot leader, Ali, became involved with Tablighi Jamaat in his teens. Around the same time, Ali's former schoolteacher noticed he had a growing Islamic militancy.<sup>93</sup> While this does not prove that TJ was the deciding factor in the radicalization of Ali, it does show a connection in that he was not *de-radicalized* by the charitable organization. Ali was not the only plotter to attend TJ gatherings, though. Both Sarwar and Zaman did as well. Moreover, suicide bombers from the July 7, 2005 terrorist attacks in London were regulars at TJ meetings.<sup>94</sup>

While Tablighi Jamaat may have played a role in radicalizing and ideological identification, another charitable group, Crescent Relief, may have helped the plotters financially. Rashid Rauf's father founded Crescent Relief in 2000 to help refugees and epidemic and natural disaster victims and to provide health care. While this seems like a noble cause, a number of conspirators of the transatlantic plot were involved with the organization.<sup>95</sup> It is claimed that after a

---

<sup>90</sup> Hoffman, "Radicalization and Subversion," 1110.

<sup>91</sup> "Bojinka II," NEFA 17.

<sup>92</sup> Susan Sachs, "A Muslim Missionary Group Draws New Scrutiny in US," *New York Times*, July 14, 2003.

<sup>93</sup> Hoffman, "Radicalization and Subversion," 1106.

<sup>94</sup> Hoffman, "Radicalization and Subversion," 1110.

<sup>95</sup> NEFA, "Bojinka II," 12.

Pakistani earthquake, funds donated to help these struggling people may have been funneled to conspirators.<sup>96</sup>

With most of the alleged plotter's families hailing from Pakistan it makes logical sense that Pakistan could be a factor in this terror plot. In fact, eight out of 10 priority terrorist investigations in the UK have some connection to Pakistan.<sup>97</sup> Ali is known to have made several trips to Pakistan, and, as noted earlier, he was there at the same time as other attackers who were getting ready to harm London with bombs consisting of hydrogen peroxide. In the months before British officials disrupted the plot, several of the other alleged transatlantic plotters were thought to have gone to Pakistan in order to attain instructions and speak with unknown conspirators.<sup>98</sup>

Most importantly, investigators now believe that there is a clear link between al-Qaeda and the attempted transatlantic bombings. Immediately after the attack was foiled, officials were cautious about suggesting there was a direct link.<sup>99</sup> However, as the evidence poured in over the next months and subsequent years, it became clear that al-Qaeda did play a part in the attack. The key player in the connection between the transatlantic plotters and al-Qaeda is Rashid Rauf. He is believed to put the two sides in touch with one another. This link presumably added to the training and motivation of the plotters to carry out a plot of such sophistication.<sup>100</sup> Another important man in this connection is Abu Obeida al-Masri. He is believed to be al-Qaeda's external operations chief and served as the conduit between the British-Pakistani cells that carried out the July 7, 2005, public transit bombings in London as well as the failed transatlantic airliner plot in Britain in 2006.<sup>101</sup>

## 8. Relation to the Muslim community

Britain has a substantial minority of Muslims living in the country, comprising some 4 percent of the total population of Britain,<sup>102</sup> whereas the Muslim population makes up about 0.8 percent of the population of the United States.<sup>103</sup> The would-be attackers were connected by their faith to the Muslim community. On a broader scale, however, the Muslim population in Britain expressed condemnation of these attacks, though often skeptical of the allegations because of recent incidents in Britain of official harassment of Muslims.

The police have stated that the Muslim community was a big help in starting the investigation. British officials felt completely blindsided by the July 7,

---

<sup>96</sup> Brian Ross and Vic Walter, "Islamic Charity's Assets Frozen for Alleged Connection to Terrorism," ABC News, August 24, 2006.

<sup>97</sup> Corera, "al-Qaeda connection."

<sup>98</sup> NEFA, "Bojinka II," 14.

<sup>99</sup> NEFA, "Bojinka II," 14. DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff did say it has the "hallmarks of an al-Qaeda plot," but failed to explicitly say al-Qaeda was involved, meaning it had several traits that had been seen through previous al-Qaeda attacks and research about the terrorist organization.

<sup>100</sup> Corera, "al-Qaeda connection."

<sup>101</sup> NEFA, "Bojinka II," 10.

<sup>102</sup> Richard Kerbaj, "Muslim population rising 10 times faster than population," *Times*, January 30, 2009.

<sup>103</sup> "Mapping the Global Muslim Population," Pew Research Center, October 2009.

2005 attacks and felt the Muslim community was unreliable in combating terrorism. However, in the transatlantic case, Muslim residents tipped police off about the growing violent nature of a group of young, Islamic men after the earlier attacks, and counterterrorism officials have lauded those efforts.<sup>104</sup>

The terrorist group, as noted earlier, claimed to have a membership in Islamic charity organizations that have been called into question by US and UK authorities. The organizations, Tablighi Jamaat and Crescent Relief, brought the plotters together in meetings and also connected them to dangerous men that may have played a part in their radicalization. Moreover, these charity organizations are suspected of having increased the financial and logistical capacity of the plotters.<sup>105</sup>

Several members of this plot are known to have frequented the Queen's Road Mosque, where Ali, the plot leader, was a regular member.<sup>106</sup> There is a question as to how these mosques affect the radicalization of young men and the dissemination of Islamic militancy. Officials of the Queen's Road mosque have called the plotters "fanatics" and have accused them of being "against the mosque."<sup>107</sup> The Masjid-E-Umer Mosque served as another contact for the British suspects.<sup>108</sup> There is not much information about its nature, but while the mosque did not cause this attack or even move the men toward the terrorism, it did occasionally bring them together with violent ideologies.

The reaction by the Muslim community has been a major topic of interest in British media since the plot was foiled. The initial reaction from Muslim communities was condemnation. Khurshid Ahmed, a member of the Commission for Racial Equality, said, "The response here is one of shock that we still find young people actively involved in activities which we would condemn as a society and also a sense of relief that a possible attack has been thwarted."<sup>109</sup> However, many Muslims felt the entire community was being targeted. Previous to the arrests of the airline plotters, British investigations had resulted in the death of several Muslim men.<sup>110</sup> Muslim community leaders warned that a third case of unfounded or exaggerated allegations would enhance the growing bitterness of British Muslims.<sup>111</sup>

The plot led to a discussion about British foreign policy as well. Muslims felt these recent attacks were prompted by resentment of foreign policy in the Middle East. This may have some merit in that there is evidence that a growing number of Muslims believe British foreign policy ignores their concerns, and this in turn can lead some to be radicalized. Indeed, a London *Times* poll found that 13 percent of British Muslims believed that those who perpetrated the July 2005 bombings were martyrs. Muslims leaders pointed out the British participation in

---

<sup>104</sup> Rotella, "Link."

<sup>105</sup> See Connections section for all sources and information.

<sup>106</sup> Duncan Gardham, "Biggest investigation since WWII," *Telegraph*, September 8, 2009.

<sup>107</sup> Jason Burke, "Muslim anger: the real story," *Guardian*, August 20, 2006.

<sup>108</sup> NEFA, "Bojinka II," 17.

<sup>109</sup> "Muslims Skeptical of Airline Plot," 9 News, August 11, 2006.

<sup>110</sup> Murphy, "Bomb Plot Immense."

<sup>111</sup> Kim Murphy, "Bomb Plot Evidence 'Immense' British Say," *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 2006.



Iraq and Lebanon as a reason for radicalization of young Muslims as well.<sup>112</sup> Muslim leaders in Britain, including some government officials, wrote an open letter to the government arguing that a change in foreign policy would show that the UK values the lives of civilians and suggesting that there would be a decrease in terrorism if the British left the Middle East.<sup>113</sup> The British government was unmoved, and the transport minister replied, “Frankly, no government worth its salt would allow its foreign policy to be dictated under the threat of terrorism.”<sup>114</sup> Also relevant is that France and Germany, countries that have not taken military action in Iraq, face a similar threat from Islamic militants.<sup>115</sup>

## 9. Depiction by the authorities

After the arrests authorities announced that they had stopped a devastating attack. “This was a plan by terrorists to cause untold death and destruction and commit mass murder,” said Paul Stephenson, a deputy commissioner of the Metropolitan Police in London. Meanwhile in America, the Director of the Department of Homeland Security said, “I think that the plot, in terms of its intent, was looking at devastation on a scale that would have rivaled 9/11...there could have been thousands of lives lost and an enormous economic impact with devastating consequences for international air travel.”<sup>116</sup> However, as more evidence came out in the months after the arrests, many came to wonder whether this dire language was needed.

In evaluating why the early reports given by authorities were so alarming, it is necessary to consider the way it looked to them at the time. Through surveillance and raids, counterterrorism agencies knew that the group had been experimenting with hydrogen peroxide explosives in Ali’s apartment. They also heard the six men making the ominous martyrdom tapes with language about death and destruction. Finally, they knew there might have been a connection to al-Qaeda and Pakistan through Rashid Rauf.

However, the authorities also knew that air tickets had not been purchased, that some members did not have passports, and that there had not been a “dry run” by the conspirators. They also knew that they were capable of preventing the plotters from getting anywhere close to an airplane. Their only real worry was that perhaps not all of the plotters were in custody and that those unknown to them could try something in the wake of their conspirators’ arrests, perhaps out of fear that those arrested might inform on them.<sup>117</sup> After the arrests, however, no more suspects were detained.

The group was under surveillance for months by British, American and Pakistani security agencies,<sup>118</sup> and there was a massive amount of intelligence in

---

<sup>112</sup> Kim Murphy and Josh Meyer, “More Suspects Sought in Alleged Bomb Plot,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 2006.

<sup>113</sup> “Muslim letter ‘misjudged’—Reid,” BBC, August 13, 2006.

<sup>114</sup> Murphy and Meyer, “Suspects Sought.”

<sup>115</sup> Burke, “Muslim Anger.”

<sup>116</sup> NEFA, “Bojinka II,” 7.

<sup>117</sup> Sandra Laville, Richard Norton-Taylor, and Vikram Dodd, “A plot to commit murder on an unimaginable scale,” *Guardian*, August 11, 2006.

<sup>118</sup> John Judis, “Fear Factor,” *New Republic*, September 5, 2006.

hand. Considering all this, it seems that the language and rhetoric used by officials was alarmist and overstated the potential danger. There was no a chance the British were going to forget about this group and let them pursue their aims. In fact, the British were willing to wait and watch to gain more incriminating evidence against the plotters.<sup>119</sup> This suggests that they had the situation under control and that they knew an attack was not imminent.

Terrorism expert Bill Durodie said at the time of the arrests that he was “slightly concerned that we heard a very senior official in one of your opening packages describing this plot as being on an unimaginable scale. I think we do expect officials to moderate their language appropriately. Obviously, it would be terrible but to inflate the language in that way lends itself to increasing public concern, rather than assuaging concerns and showing a robust response.”<sup>120</sup>

Some contend that the arrests were made and publicized for political reasons, that US President George W. Bush, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf were exaggerating the crisis for political reasons. With low approval ratings for Bush and Blair, and with Musharraf wanting to earn points with its chief protector, the US, all had reasons to seek support by achieving a big success in counterterrorism.<sup>121</sup>

## 10. Depiction by the media

In the beginning, the media reported government documents and the information received from press conferences, echoing that of the government. However, it was extremely difficult to obtain concrete additional evidence, and conflicting reports and speculations became common. For example, citing anonymous officials, the number of flights targeted by the plotters ranged widely.<sup>122</sup> As time went on and more data was discovered or released, press reporting became more reliable.

Between 2006 and 2008, press reporting served as the sole source for information on the routes identified by the operatives<sup>123</sup> because British trial practice requires officials and prosecutors to be extremely tight lipped because public information may have detrimental effects on their prosecution of the case.

In the following months, the media speculated about the validity and immanency of the threat and its plotters. John Judis, a writer for *The New Republic*, noted that “If the initial story offered by Chertoff and Townsend—and the British and Pakistani counterparts—represents a house, then that house is now tottering on its foundations and ready to collapse in ruins...Accounts contradicting the original story have appeared, among other places, in the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, and *Los Angeles Times*...These accounts appear to have been inspired by leaks from American and British officials.”<sup>124</sup> Once the

---

<sup>119</sup> Philip Shenon and Neil A. Lewis, “British were willing to wait,” *New York Times*, August 13, 2006.

<sup>120</sup> Bill Durodie, “Terrorism Expert of UK Plot,” *Australian Broadcasting Company*, August 11, 2006.

<sup>121</sup> Judis, “Fear Factor.” Judis describes this as a mere speculation.

<sup>122</sup> NEFA, “Bojinka II,” 3-4.

<sup>123</sup> NEFA, “Bojinka II,” 4.

<sup>124</sup> Judis, “Fear Factor.”

media started to question the government on the immanency and likelihood of success of the attack, reporting started to become more coherent and rational.<sup>125</sup> Only then, did important aspects of the plot that were vital to the public's knowledge, such as plotters background, true connection to al-Qaeda, and the explosives planning to be used, become available.

### 11. Policing costs

The transatlantic bombing plot was one of the most costly and complex criminal investigations in Britain since WWII.<sup>126</sup> Authorities worked around the clock through dozens of agencies to bring these plotters to justice, and intelligence and counterterrorism work was performed on three continents. The group was under surveillance for more than a year before the arrests, and it led to two trials over three years.

Over 220 officers worked on the anti-terror command, and 9,710 statements were taken, there were 102 searches of houses, flats, cars and cafes, and 800 devices were seized including computers, laptops, external hard drives, and USB devices. As of September 2009, police, security services, and prosecutors had spent £35,000,000 on foiling the plot, and, most staggeringly, the case had cost the Crown Prosecution Service and Legal Services Commission £100,000,000.<sup>127</sup> And there have been additional costs since that tally was made because further trials connected to the case have been held.

Some other costs might be mentioned. Despite the fact that officials foiled the plot, a heavy financial burden was placed on airlines: British Airways declared that new security measures cost their company £100m, while Easy and Ryanair also announced massive losses.<sup>128</sup> OAG, a provider of travel industry data, estimated that up to 400,000 people were affected by the security alert. Officials at airports around Britain reported delays and cancellations. This economic hindrance could be viewed as a victory for al-Qaeda which has sought to strike economic targets such as the World Trade Center. Osama bin Laden has commented on the economic impact of 9/11 saying that the hijackers struck the American economy in the heart and inflicted more than a trillion dollars in losses.<sup>129</sup>

### 12. Relevance of the internet

Compared to other cases, this case relied less on the internet for recruitment and radicalization. Nonetheless, it was extremely important to the terrorists for overseas communication and for gathering logistical information including flight schedules, although these uses were also a vital source of

---

<sup>125</sup> The lack of coherent reporting was known among the media. So much so that the *New York Times* published an extensive story on August 28, 2006, three weeks after arrests were made, that is titled, "Details Emerge in British Terror Case" which shows the lack of information the press initially had.

<sup>126</sup> Gardham, "WWII." Gardham's article is a virtual encyclopedia for the costs of the work that went into foiling the plot.

<sup>127</sup> "Airline bomb plot by the numbers," *Telegraph*, September 7, 2009.

<sup>128</sup> NEFA, "Bojinka II," 21-22.

<sup>129</sup> NEFA, "Bojinka II," 22.

intelligence for counterterrorism officials, helping them to foil the devastating operation. Kip Hawley, head of the Transportation Security Administration, said that the terrorists “were clicking online all over the place.”<sup>130</sup>

Communication with Rashid Rauf in Pakistan was accomplished daily through e-mail<sup>131</sup> and phone calls.<sup>132</sup> Rauf offered advice and encouragement while maintaining his connections to al-Qaeda operatives in Pakistan. British authorities intercepted these e-mails and they were very important in gaining information about the seriousness and the timetables of the men. As noted, when this intelligence reached President George W. Bush, he ordered the arrest of Rauf in Pakistan, prompting the arrests of all other 24 suspects in Britain.<sup>133</sup> Authorities were given a high incentive to act when internet traffic increased heavily and certain men disappeared from the intelligence radar.<sup>134</sup> Authorities also gathered a vast amount of incriminating evidence from this activity to be used in foiling the plot as well as in the court prosecution.

### 13. Are we safer?

Essentially the answer is yes and no.

It is clear that these men meant to harm innocent people with these attacks, and their martyrdom tapes show their fanaticism and militancy. When Ali was asked about the justification of the death of women and children aboard the planes, he dismissively replied, “There are no innocents.”<sup>135</sup> The world is clearly safer with Ali, Tanvir Hussain, Sarwar,<sup>136</sup> Savant, Khan, Zaman,<sup>137</sup> Khatib, Uddin and Nabeel Hussain<sup>138</sup> all behind bars.

On the other hand, however, the plotters would never have been able to do anything because they were under full surveillance. Even though some of their reports were overcooked and inaccurate,<sup>139</sup> counterterrorism officials showed resolve and competence in the investigation, and the foiling of this plot proves that terrorists, especially if they are connected to al-Qaeda, are fighting an uphill battle.

---

<sup>130</sup> NEFA, “Bojinka II,” 6.

<sup>131</sup> Gardham reported telephone calls were made from Ali to someone in Pakistan and they were talking in code. This was the only report in which this information was stated, so the legitimacy of this claim is not concrete.

<sup>132</sup> Gardham, “WWII.” This article was one of the few reports to contain e-mails between Rauf and the plotters.

<sup>133</sup> Gardham, “WWII.”

<sup>134</sup> Philip Webster, Sean O’Neill, and Stewart Tendler, “A ‘plan to commit unimaginable mass murder,’” *Times*, August 11, 2006.

<sup>135</sup> Hoffman, “Radicalization and Subversion,” 1105.

<sup>136</sup> Vikram Dodd, “Three terrorists convicted of plotting to blow up jets over Atlantic,” *Guardian*, September 7, 2009. In researching this paper, it was clear soon after I began that Vikram Dodd’s work was the most reliable and encompassing reporting available in the press. I have cited numerous works by him that have been enormously insightful.

<sup>137</sup> “Would-be suicide bombers jailed for life,” BBC, July 12, 2010.

<sup>138</sup> Sean O’Neill, “Bomb plot leader’s friends convicted of terror offences,” *Times*, December 10, 2009.

<sup>139</sup> Patrick Smith, “Ask the Pilot,” Salon.com, September 15, 2006.

But have the measures the authorities have taken after the arrests made us any safer? Many say no. By banning bottles of liquids that are over four ounces, authorities thought air travel would be safer because the plan of the transatlantic bombers would not be possible. Conversely, this measure may have created more of a risk than the liquids did. After the ban on liquids, airports saw a 20% surge in checked luggage, and screeners of checked baggage have been forced to hurry, and checked bags accordingly may not be properly inspected for explosives or other dangerous materials thereby actually decreasing security.<sup>140</sup>

Security analyst Bruce Schneier believes that the response to the foiled attack has been shortsighted and counterproductive. According to Schneier, focusing on the attacks that have been planned by terrorists is a waste because there are just too many threats and targets available to terrorists. He wants to see counterterrorism officials pool their resources toward classic methods of investigation and intelligence because that is how Ali's plot was foiled.<sup>141</sup> In his work, Schneier has both scolded the work of airport security and lauded that of investigative teams because he views investigative work to be the best way to make passengers safe.

With respect to the alleged connection to al-Qaeda, revelations that have come to light since the plot was thwarted suggest to some that there is still a long way to go until we are safe. In particular, Bruce Hoffman finds the target of the attacks to be considerably troubling:

“What is especially alarming about the airlines plot, however, is that it was not directed against the softer, more accessible targets like subway or commuter trains, hotels, and tourist destinations that the conventional wisdom once held a diminished and de-graded Al Qaeda only capable of: but against arguably the most internationally hardened target set since 9/11—commercial aviation. This development calls into question some of the most fundamental assumptions about Al Qaeda's capabilities and intentions, given that the movement seems undeterred from the same grand homicidal ambitions it demonstrated on 9/11.”<sup>142</sup>

Hoffman's fear is based on the fact that authorities and counterterrorism officials thought the extensive work done to quell al-Qaeda since 9/11 had weakened their ability to wreak havoc against the world, but with the plotters' connection to al-Qaeda, it is clear officials need to re-evaluate the strength and goals of the terrorist network to successfully prevent future attempted destruction by al-Qaeda.

## 14. Conclusions

This case was unique in its scale and in its goals and objectives. No other case since 9/11 has involved this level of commercial aviation terrorism, and it has been compared to 9/11 for its potential for killing thousands of people. This comparison is a stretch when looking at the respective methods of attack. In 9/11,

<sup>140</sup> Thomas Frank, “Checked luggage strains security,” *USA Today*, August 24, 2006.

<sup>141</sup> Bruce Schneier, “Bruce Schneier: Focus on terrorists, not tactics,” *Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune*, August 12, 2006.

<sup>142</sup> Hoffman, “Radicalization and Subversion,” 1111.

the terrorists used the planes as missiles, plunging them into occupied buildings, whereas the transatlantic plot sought simply to bring the planes down.

One case that occurred before 9/11 almost mirrors this one. Bojinka, a plot hatched by 9/11 planner, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, and 1993 World Trade Center bomber, Ramzi Yousef, was hatched in the Philippines in 1994 and foiled in 1995. Unlike the London plot, it did not involve suicide. Rather, the planners sought to smuggle liquid chemical bombs on flights over and around the Pacific Ocean, then leave them on the flight after the plane had landed, and the bomb would detonate in mid-air on the next flight on a timed schedule. KSM and Yousef succeeded in their plan once when the chemical test bomb killed a Japanese businessman. This plot was eventually discovered in January 1995 in Manila, when a fire broke out in an apartment where chemicals were being mixed.<sup>143</sup> Yousef was eventually caught and convicted in a New York court for his role in the conspiracy. Both plots used liquid chemical explosives and were focused on planes that were over oceans. And, of course, both failed. After the transatlantic plot had been foiled, authorities cited Bojinka as almost an identical plot, different only in the name of the ocean flown over.<sup>144</sup>

Audrey Cronin has written extensively about the importance of a leader in a terrorist plot and considers a leader as the communicator of the rationale and the one who helps supporters overcome moral qualms about killing innocent people.<sup>145</sup> Though she does not reference this transatlantic case, her work can be applied to the role of Abdullah Ahmed Ali.<sup>146</sup>

Max Abrahms has written extensively on the motives of terrorism and the individuals drawn to the movements, arguing that people join terrorist organizations for their social solidarity, not their political return.<sup>147</sup> Abrahms notes that there is a discrepancy between the official goals of an organization and the latent social goals governing its behavior. At least with respect to this case, Abrahms' position appears to be inadequate to explain why many joined this group. While some may have been socially alienated, the plotters maintained that their motivation was to protest UK foreign policy,<sup>148</sup> not perpetuating the existence of the group. Moreover, the group would not have been interested in killing the vast majority of its members in a martyrdom act if it was worried about the survival of their organization.

At first glance, this plot is extremely frightening. The men involved had al-Qaeda connections and were intent on murdering thousands of people in the name of their religion and in protest of Western policies they deemed to be unfair. Their plot was possible and could have been carried out had there been no counterterrorism work against them, something that could potentially have led to

---

<sup>143</sup> NEFA, "Bojinka II," 21.

<sup>144</sup> NEFA, "Bojinka II," 20-21. All information from this section was found in this source.

<sup>145</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, 14-15.

<sup>146</sup> Rashid Rauf may have helped connect the plotters to al-Qaeda operatives in Pakistan who may have come up with the plan, but Ali was the operational leader in the UK.

<sup>147</sup> Max Abrahms, "What Terrorists Really Want," *International Security*, Spring 2008, 95-96.

<sup>148</sup> Nico Hines, "Terror mastermind Abdulla Ahmed Ali guilty of bomb plot," *Times*, September 8, 2008.

the deaths of 1750 passengers<sup>149</sup> in an attack that rivaled 9/11. Citizens in North America and Europe could be on red-alert as in the fall of 2001, the economy might take a huge loss out of fears of another attack, and the airline industry could be in the toilet. The potential backlash against Muslims in the Western nations could reduce the level of freedom and liberty now commonplace. And there could be military action by Western nations causing more needless death and destruction. The world might possibly become extremely different and a more dangerous place if the attack had been carried out.

However, this case should also give citizens of Western nations hope. Work by British counterterrorism officials was unparalleled—and credit should be given to the US and Pakistan as well for their work in gathering intelligence. Their commitment to stopping these men was unwavering and, by catching this plot early, they were able to obtain massive amounts of intelligence. This attack was sophisticated and possible, but the counterterrorism work obviated it. The al-Qaeda connection is particularly scary, but the ability of officials to recognize the connection and those identified with it, made sure no attack was going to occur. And for this work, I, as well as many others I am sure, are extremely thankful that governments around the world are working around the clock to ensure their citizens safety and well-being from those who would like to see innocent people die.

---

<sup>149</sup> Not including any that might be killed on the ground if the planes were bombed over land.