

PolicyWatch #1260

## British Counterterrorism Efforts: Implications for the United States

By [Simon Henderson](#)

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British police have been praised for their speedy and effective efforts in thwarting terrorist attacks this month in London and Glasgow, as well as for the arrest and subsequent prosecution of four men who attempted to bomb the London transport network on July 21, 2005. Today, those bombers were each sentenced to a minimum of forty years in prison. (Two alleged accomplices, on whose guilt the jury could not agree, face a retrial.) But details of the cases and official comments suggest that Britain's vulnerabilities to al-Qaeda-style terrorism remain acute and could lead to tension with the United States.

### Details of July 2005 Plot Revealed

With the conclusion of the trial, new and disturbing details have emerged. Although Eritrean-born Muktar Ibrahim tried to blow himself apart on an east London bus on July 21, 2005, he could just as easily have come to the United States under the visa-waiver program. He had become a British citizen months earlier despite a criminal record that included indecent assault, robberies, and a gang attack for which he spent five years in a youth prison. In addition, more than a year before the attempted bombing, covert police surveillance had observed him undergoing quasimilitary training in the British countryside, along with his three fellow plotters.

Upon acquiring his British passport, Ibrahim traveled to Pakistan; his ride to the airport was an Iraqi terrorist suspect being tailed by a ten-member surveillance squad from MI5, the British Security Service. He was then in Pakistan at the same time as two of the so-called "7/7 bombers," whose London suicide attacks (using homemade explosives similar to Ibrahim's) killed fifty-two people only two weeks before the July 21 attempts.

### Possible Threats, Law Enforcement Shortcomings

The former head of the MI5, Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, warned this month that Britain faces a terrorist threat of "unprecedented scale, ambition, and ruthlessness," with a "very real possibility" that terrorists "may sometime, somewhere attempt a chemical, biological, radiological, or even nuclear attack." She revealed that an unprecedented number of people -- more than a hundred -- were awaiting trial in British courts on terrorism offenses in more than forty separate cases. She also noted that the radicalization of teenage Muslims "from first exposure, to extremism, to active participation in terrorist plotting" is now alarmingly rapid.

In recent days, a British newspaper reported that up to eight British police officers and staff members are suspected of links to extremist groups, including al-Qaeda, with several believed to have attended terrorist training camps in Pakistan or Afghanistan. They have not been fired because the police do not have the legal power to dismiss them. Another story described how one Algerian man who was extradited from Britain to France and then imprisoned for involvement in a terrorist plot that killed eight people has since returned to London, where he found employment handing out parking tickets. (His identity was discovered only by chance, after a motorist protested a parking fine.)

Meanwhile, in the *Sunday Telegraph*, the head of Interpol claimed that Britain was failing to check would-be immigrants against a global database, and former Clinton administration official Ronald Noble accused

London of "putting UK citizens at risk." The paper also reported concern that security checks on immigrants to Britain had been contracted out to a company based in India -- a questionable practice in light of the uncertain standards of private firms.

### **New Political Approach**

British prime minister Gordon Brown has appointed Admiral Sir Alan West, former head of the Royal Navy, to the newly created position of security minister. The admiral, who this week became Lord West so that he could sit in the House of Lords, said in a July 8 interview that he had been asked to "sort out" the British response to the terrorist threat because "we are not getting our message across properly." According to him, "it will take ten to fifteen years" to overcome the threat posed by radicalized young Muslims.

West also expanded on the British government's core "four Ps" antiterrorism strategy of "prepare, protect, pursue, and prevent," devised after the July 2005 attacks. Specifically, he called on his fellow citizens to be "a little bit un-British" and inform police about the suspicious activities of even friends and neighbors -- a remark perhaps aimed at the British Muslim community, which is apparently reluctant to report fellow Muslims to the authorities. But he stated that he did not like to talk in terms of "the Muslim community," saying, without irony, "I have a lot of Muslim friends." According to him, terrorists like the July 2005 bombers, who have "severely damaged one of the world's great religions," are "a disparate core of people" who are generally "racist," "bigoted," "avaricious," and eager to restore the caliphate.

In his new position, West could find his opinions in conflict with Washington's. In the same interview, for example, he claimed to "hate" the expression "war on terror": "When I first heard it -- I think it came over from the States -- I thought it was totally the wrong thing." (President Bush was in fact the first to publicly use the phrase, in his televised address before Congress nine days after the September 11 attacks: "Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated.")

### **Possible Diplomatic Challenge**

So far, only one of the eight people arrested after the London and Glasgow incidents has been charged. (British law allows the police to hold terrorist suspects for twenty-eight days before charges are made.) Only six have been identified by name. The other two are described in media reports as Saudi doctors working at a hospital in Scotland. The degree of help Saudi authorities will lend the investigation can only be guessed. Dealing with the mercurial interior minister Prince Nayef poses a challenge even in the best of times. At present, the obstacles could be more numerous: a British legal inquiry into alleged bribes paid to the kingdom as part of a major defense contract was dropped in December 2006 after the former British ambassador to Riyadh asserted that Saudi intelligence cooperation on terrorism could be affected if the inquiry continued.

Nevertheless, the British media has continued to report on the issue, including the alleged payment of around \$2 billion over a ten-year period to former Saudi ambassador to Washington Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who was involved in negotiating the original contract and subsequent amendments. Prince Bandar, now the secretary-general of the Saudi National Security Council, denies any wrongdoing. The row over the bribery allegations has already led to reported delays in the final agreement between London and Riyadh on the supply of \$12 billion worth of new fighter aircraft. One report indicated that the Saudis have delayed signing until the new Brown government has been in office for several months.

In general, U.S.-British intelligence and security cooperation is regarded as being extraordinarily close. Yet, although Washington should continue to learn from Britain's experience, it will no doubt remain concerned by its ally's reported weaknesses, especially after yesterday's warning by al-Qaeda deputy leader Ayman al-Zawahiri that the group was preparing to retaliate for Britain's knighting of novelist Salman Rushdie.

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