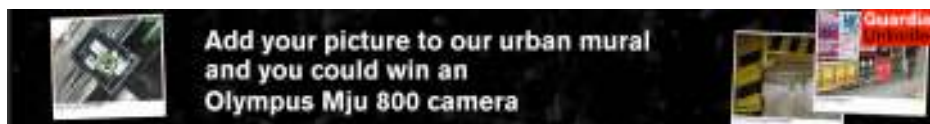


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Focus

## The Karachi connection

From Pakistan to Britain, the remarkable story of an international web of terror

**Jamie Doward**  
**Sunday August 13, 2006**  
[The Observer](#)

At dusk last Thursday a man could be seen shuttling between a white van and a nondescript flat sandwiched in a row of houses on Forest Road in Walthamstow, east London. The van parked outside the flat was no ordinary van. Inside were racks of equipment - cameras, brushes, flashlights - all the forensic paraphernalia used in modern police investigations.

The flat was guarded by two police officers despatched from Walthamstow police station 200 yards away. Across Britain - in east London, High Wycombe and Birmingham - similar scenes were being played out as police searched the homes of the 24 terrorist suspects who had been arrested earlier in the day under suspicion of plotting a massacre which, according to officials, would have been on an 'unimaginable scale'.

The Forest Road flat is unlikely to throw up too many new leads, however. According to neighbours, the two men who used to live there, believed to have been of North African origin, left more than a month ago. 'It was sold overnight,' said a neighbour. 'One day it was up for sale and the next it was gone. I think two men moved in the following weekend. No furniture was moved or anything - it was really strange.'

The two men's whereabouts remains unknown. It is not clear whether they are still at large, part of a disparate group of terrorist suspects who the police are still looking for. According to an internal US Department of Homeland Security document, as many as 50 people were involved in the alleged plot to blow up 10 transatlantic airliners, a figure that British intelligence sources - who insist all the main suspects have been rounded up - have declined to comment on. But if correct it suggests the 'second phase',

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as intelligence officials term the period that follows the initial arrests, is going to be as equally complex as the 12-month operation that led to last week's raids.

As the Home Secretary, John Reid, acknowledged yesterday: 'We're not yet at the stage where we can or should stop searching. That is why the alert level remains at critical as a precaution.'

The security services' preference would have been to wait as long as possible, allowing the police to continue their surveillance in the hope of arresting all those suspected of being involved. The botched raid on a Forest Gate home in May had made all involved in anti-terrorism wary of acting too soon. But this was a luxury they could not afford.

The intelligence services had been tipped off that an attack was to take place within the next couple of weeks. It is believed that money had already been wired through for the suspects to buy their plane tickets, suggesting an attack - or possibly two waves of attacks, several days or weeks apart to maximise their terrifying impact - was imminent.

Over the next few days, following that money trail will be crucial to the intelligence agencies as they attempt to build a case against the suspects and gain a clearer picture of whether many young people, all British-born, would want to martyr themselves and kill thousands - and if so, why. Follow the money trail, intelligence experts say, and you can track the suspects. The money came from Pakistan.

Last Monday, Douglas Alexander was holidaying on the island of Mull in Scotland when he took a phone call from Sir David Rowlands, permanent secretary at the Department of Transport. 'There's something you need to know,' Rowlands told the Transport Secretary. 'But I can't tell you over the phone.' A Whitehall official was despatched to Scotland to brief Alexander. As official and minister talked in confidence while gazing out on the quaint fishing port of Tobermory, Alexander was told there was an urgent terrorist threat - although at that stage it was not considered immediate. However, he made a decision to return to London. Within three hours an RAF helicopter had transported him back to the capital where he was soon holding talks with transport officials.

But outside of an elite few, the first inkling Whitehall had that something was up came late last Wednesday evening when telephones at the homes of countless officials started ringing. Press officers, ministerial advisers, support staff were asked to come in early the next day. They were not told why.

Two hours earlier Reid had been told the threat of the attack had become imminent and that police had decided to move in on the suspects. Reid would have appreciated the irony. Hours before, he had given a speech to the think-tank Demos, warning that critics of the government's anti-terrorism measures 'just don't get it'. He could have been forgiven for thinking that perhaps the unfolding events might change the critics' minds.

Reid had used his speech to present the government's Countering International Terrorism strategy and outlining how it had moved to reduce the terrorist threat since the 7/7 bombings. The report's overview was rendered eerily prescient by subsequent events.

'The current threat from Islamist terrorism is serious and sustained,' the report intoned. 'It is genuinely international in scope, involving a variety of groups, networks and individuals who are driven by particular violent and extremist beliefs. It is indiscriminate - aiming to cause mass casualties, regardless of the age, nationality, or religion of their victims; and the terrorists are often prepared to commit suicide to kill others. Overall, we judge that the scale of the threat is potentially still increasing and is not likely to diminish significantly for some years.'

One man able to comprehend the scale of the threat was Andy Hayman, the head of the Metropolitan Police's specialist operations department. Hayman was dining with his family in Spain last Wednesday evening when colleagues rang to suggest he return immediately. His flight touched down shortly after 3am on Thursday, soon after the majority of suspects had been picked up.

As the police operation unfolded, Reid, accompanied by Alexander, chaired meetings of Cobra, the government's committee which operates during emergencies. Those attending were briefed on the nature of the plot which involved the mixing of peroxide-based paste hidden in sports drinks to form an explosive gel that could be ignited by a detonator hidden in an iPod or mobile phone. The suspects allegedly intended to blow the planes up over the Atlantic so that there would be little in the way of forensic evidence for investigators to work out how the bombs had been built.

At 2am the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre raised the UK threat level to critical, suggesting an attack was imminent. At 2.30am Cobra broke up and then resumed again two and a half hours later. Phone calls were exchanged between Reid and the Prime Minister, on holiday in Barbados. The White House was also kept fully informed.

Bush had known about the plot for some time. He and the Prime Minister had discussed it over secure lines on Sunday in a lengthy telephone conference call to Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas, where Bush is spending his annual summer holiday. The pair talked again on Wednesday. It was only then that Bush was told that the British police were about to act. Though the story rapidly made headlines around the world, Bush was not woken during the night as the operation went into action.

City officials in New York had also been briefed ahead of time about the plot. Several months ago they had been told that there was a major investigation going on in Britain but they had not been given any specifics. In the wake of the arrests in Britain, the US on Thursday raised its colour-coded terrorist threat alert warning to 'red' for flights from Britain, which was the first time it had ever been on its maximum level, signalling an imminent terrorist attack. The decision came at 1am Washington time, after the British

operation had been carried out, and was approved by Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff.

At 6:45 BST Reid went public with the news that the police had prevented a suspected plot to 'bring down a number of aircraft through midflight explosions'. For the hundreds of thousands of passengers passing through Britain's airports, Thursday was going to be a long day.

At the end of last month, Pakistani security forces arrested an al-Qaeda militant they suspected of helping plan the suicide bombing that killed four people, including a US diplomat, outside the US consulate in Karachi in March.

The suspect, originally from Uzbekistan, was arrested in Wana, the main town in South Waziristan, which borders Afghanistan. The arrest went largely ignored. But there is now a suspicion the arrest had a significant bearing on the events of last week. In addition, it is also believed that a group of as many as 20 militants based in Karachi and Lahore who were picked up by Pakistani security several months ago may have also provided useful information. Five days ago, another suspect was picked up in Faisalabad. A web was emerging.

The trigger for the raid in Britain, however, came when Pakistani intelligence arrested seven men, two of whom were British, last week. One of the men was Rashid Rauf, who was understood to have been involved in a Pakistan charity which had links with Britain. It was an irregular payment of funds from this charity to Britain that alerted intelligence officials.

According to sources in Pakistan and the US, Rauf is the brother of Tayib Rauf, who was arrested and released without charge in connection with the 7/7 bombings and was again arrested in connection with last week's alleged plot.

West Midlands Police indicated yesterday that a property linked to Rashid Rauf had been searched in connection with two murders in Birmingham. One of those was the high-profile racially motivated stabbing of 23-year-old black IT worker, Isaiah Young-Sam, during the race riots in Birmingham last October. The property had been previously searched in connection with the fatal stabbing of his uncle, Mohammed Saeed, 54, in April 2002.

It appears Rauf's arrest in Pakistan may have also speeded up the terror plot. A senior Pakistani security official said that within days of him being lifted a telephone call was made from someone in Pakistan urging the British plotters to execute their plan. 'This telephone call intercept in Karachi and the arrest of Rashid Rauf helped a lot to foil the terror plan,' a source said.

Also arrested was Muhammad al-Ghandra and Ahmed al-Khan, two al-Qaeda linked operatives, one of whom is believed to have travelled to Germany in recent years. Still at large, however, is Matiur Rahman, a senior figure in the al-Qaeda-linked Pakistani militant group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, whose name was mentioned by one of the detainees during interrogation and may in time turn out

to be the key figure in facilitating links between British Muslim groups and Islamic extremists in Pakistan.

Jhangvi was the group held responsible for the kidnap and murder of the Wall Street Journal reporter, Daniel Pearl. Pakistani authorities have several times over the past couple of years uncovered Jhangvi chemical- and bomb-making labs around Karachi.

The Pakistani authorities have been keen to have their recent role in dismantling the alleged plot acknowledged. 'Pakistan played a very important role in uncovering and breaking this international terrorist network,' a spokeswoman for the Pakistani foreign ministry said.

Pakistan's eagerness to be seen to be combatting international terrorism is understandable. The country has long been accused of harbouring radical Islamic groups who have sponsored terrorism around the world.

Dr Gareth Price, head of the Asia Programme at Chatham House, says the country's politics are complex, with President Pervez Musharraf needing the support of the country's more extreme elements in order to pass legislation.

'It is a very confused picture,' Price said. 'In one situation they are a key ally, but in others they are a lukewarm ally at best, and these are both running simultaneously.'

Although Pakistani intelligence played a vital role in the arrests, the original tip-off about the alleged plot is understood to have come from an MI5 informant from within the British Muslim community more than a year ago.

Once alerted, intelligence agencies tracked the suspects by using phone records to chart the web of calls. At the same time, the intelligence community was investigating two dozen similar plots, according to security sources.

Before long, the investigation team knew some of the suspects' email addresses, and were able to monitor them, too, as well as details of their movements in and out of Britain. In the next phase of the investigation, the police and security service relied heavily on phonetaps, bugs planted in their suspects' homes and covert tracking devices fixed to their vehicles. It is understood a number of the suspects visited Pakistan, some several times, a pattern that has become familiar to intelligence experts.

In March, Mohammed Ajmal Khan, from Coventry, was sentenced to nine years in prison for raising money to fund acts of terrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Khan admitted attending a Pakistan terror training camp run by Lashkar-i-Taiba, a radical Kashmiri militant group with close links to al-Qaeda.

Earlier this year, Syed Haris Ahmed was arrested in the US on terrorism charges. Ahmed was also linked to Lashkar-i-Taiba and had been in contact with three British Muslim men arrested in London on terrorism charges in November 2005.

Perhaps inevitably, there have also been claims of links between last week's raid and 7/7. There is a suggestion one of the two Britons picked up last week by Pakistani intelligence had left a voice message on a phone found in the home of one of the 7/7 bombers. Security sources have so far played down the claim.

What is clear is that what was being planned amounted to a new phase in the evolution of terror - the mobilisation of a sizable underground network of sympathisers. 'You could say they were sleepers,' said one security agent who took part in the months-long surveillance operation that preceded the arrests. 'They were everyday, working people, who had never given any kind of hassle to the police or their own communities. Their public profiles were very quiet.'

Last Friday, the Queens Road mosque in Walthamstow looked like it was hosting a film premiere. As camera crews jostled with newspaper reporters, the mosque's imam appealed for calm.

Hundreds of Muslims gathered as usual for Friday prayers at the Masjid-e-Umer mosque on Queens Road, directly opposite the terraced house of the arrested 22-year-old Waheed Zaman, where armed police stood guard.

The media's interest was sparked by news that several of the suspects were members of the mosque, which is also linked to the Muslim organisation, Tablighi Jamaat, whose UK headquarters are in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire.

Michael J Heimbach, the deputy chief of the FBI's international terrorism section, has said that al-Qaeda uses Jamaat 'for recruiting, both now and in the past'. French intelligence have also raised concerns that some of Tablighi's members are linked to extremist groups and have branded it the 'antechamber of fundamentalism'. The Philippine government has accused the organisation of acting both as a conduit for Saudi money to Islamic terrorism and a cover for Pakistani jihad volunteers. Pakistani intelligence reports suggest that 400 American Tablighi recruits have received training in Pakistani or Afghan terror training camps since 1989.

Richard Reid, the jailed shoe bomber who tried to blow up a flight to America, attended mosques run by the group. Two of the 7/7 bombers, Shehzad Tanweer and Mohammed Sidique Khan, attended the Tablighi mosque with Tanweer travelling to Pakistan with fellow members of the organisation.

Alex Alexiev, vice president for research at the Centre for Security Policy in Washington writes that 'all Tablighis preach a creed that is hardly distinguishable from the radical Wahhabi-Salafi jihadist ideology that so many terrorists share'. The group insists it is a peaceful organisation.

A member of the Queens Road mosque, a man called Mohammad, who did not wish his surname to be published, confirmed that the mosque has a strong relationship with the group Jamaat, and defended the link.

'They teach us to follow the law of the land: don't bite the hand that feeds us,' he said. 'Tablighi Jamaat want to educate young Muslims who don't follow the basic tenets of Islam: to pray, to fast. It is about actions rather than being a Muslim in name only.'

However, the links between British mosques and radical Islamic organisations in Pakistan have been concerning police for several years. Patrick Mercer, the Tory spokesman for homeland security, told The Observer that, following surveillance operations, Greater Manchester Police had developed 'profound suspicions' against 150 men who regularly flew to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Mercer said the principal stumbling block was that evidence obtained by phone taps could not be used in court, nor could evidence from informants whose identity intelligence officials were keen to protect. 'These are individuals with combat experience who have come to terms with death and are prepared to commit suicide, but through no fault of the police are being released back into the wider community,' said Mercer.

Imtiaz Qadir, spokesman for the Waltham Forest Islamic Association, warned people not to judge the suspects, several of whom he knew very well. 'These people are being portrayed as guilty by the media and we don't even know the evidence or what has been found,' Qadir said.

And he warned the repercussions could be disastrous for community relations. 'My major concern is the aftermath of these arrests if no evidence is found against these people,' he said. 'They have ripped apart a community and now we have to see the consequences.'

The release of one suspect late on Friday night did little to convince the Muslim community that the police had a case.

Amid the collective shock one question echoes. How could such apparently well-liked, popular, peaceful young men - the youngest being 17, the oldest 35 - come to be suspected of conspiring to commit such horrific acts? Many of those arrested came from comfortable backgrounds, had been to college and were holding down jobs.

And at least three of the men arrested were converts to Islam, some with wholly British backgrounds. One, Ibrahim Savant, 25, from Walthamstow, changed his name from Oliver when he became a Muslim, according to neighbours. Don Stewart-Whyte, 21, whose father was an agent for the Conservative party, changed his name to Abdul Waheed after converting about six months ago. People who knew him said that Stewart-Whyte's behaviour altered when he took up the religion, turning away from drink and immersing himself in Islam.

Many British Muslims were last week quick to suggest the causes for alienation, disaffection and, ultimately, violence lay in conflicts around the world. As Mohammed, from the Forest Road mosque, puts it: 'Muslims face 9/11 and 7/7 every day. Israeli blood is seen as more valuable than Muslim blood. Why would an educated young British

Muslim guy be influenced to commit murder? It's because he's thought to himself, "This country's doing nothing for me".'

It is a bleak observation. When even moderate Muslims feel so alienated there is little hope the more extreme elements can be contained. Unless something changes fundamentally last week's success by the intelligence community will simply become a one-off victory in the ongoing war against terror. As one security source observed: 'The day after the arrests many of those involved were transferred to other investigations. There is no let up.'

## **The conspiracy unfolds**

### **7 July**

Four bombs explode on tube trains and a bus in London within an hour and kill 52 people, along with four suicide bombers. A further 700 people are injured during the rush-hour attack.

### **Later in July**

The authorities receive a call from a Muslim man reporting his suspicions about an acquaintance. Intelligence agencies begin a surveillance operation lasting more than 12 months.

### **9 August**

**11am:** John Reid, the Home Secretary, due to give a speech on immigration to the think-tank Demos, changes the subject to tackle critics of the government's anti-terrorism strategy. 'They just don't get it,' he says.

**10pm:** Reid chairs the first of two meetings of Cobra (Cabinet Office Briefing Room A), the emergency panel of officials from the police, intelligence and crisis-management bodies.

### **10 August**

**1.30am:** Warned that the bombers might strike within 48 hours, Cobra approves police raids, and gets authorisation from Tony Blair. Police begin to make 24 arrests in London, Birmingham and High Wycombe. The Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre raises UK threat status to critical, the highest level. Airports are issued with the new security guidelines which cause widespread chaos and the cancellation of hundreds of flights.

**6.45am:** Reid says police raids are part of a counter-terrorism operation against a plot designed to 'bring down a number of aircraft through mid-flight explosions'. Sources suggest the plotters intended to blow up nine US-bound aircraft over three hours by using a liquid explosive which could be mixed during the flight and triggered by electrical signals from devices such as a disposable-camera flash, iPod or mobile phone.

**9.55am:** Paul Stephenson, deputy commissioner of the



Met, says: 'This was intended to be mass murder on an unimaginable scale.'

**4.50pm:** George Bush thanks Blair for 'busting the plot'.

## 11 August

**3am:** The Bank of England identifies 19 people whose bank accounts and other assets it is freezing under UN sanctions rules.

**9pm:** Police are granted warrants to hold 22 of the arrested suspects until Wednesday.

A hearing regarding the detention of another is adjourned until tomorrow, while one person is released with no further action.

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