

Red flags raised at London Bridge inquest: Was terrorist ringleader an agent of MI5?

4 Jun.—Evidence presented at the inquest into the 3 June 2017 vehicular and knife attack at London Bridge, in which eight people (including two Australians) were killed and 48 injured, adds to the already strong case that the perpetrators did not “slip through the net” as UK authorities have claimed. It has long been known that the ringleader of the attack, Khuram Butt, had been closely watched by the Security Service (MI5) for two years, up to the day of the attack. The inquest has now revealed that London Metropolitan Police (Met) were also investigating Butt, but lacked (read: were denied by MI5) sufficient intelligence to foil his plot. And despite being a known member of a proscribed terrorist organisation, Butt somehow passed a background check in 2016 for a security job with London’s subway service. The inescapable conclusion is that like other domestic UK terrorists in recent years, including some of his close associates, Butt was himself an agent¹ of MI5, which evidence shows does not prevent terrorism, but manages it for British state purposes.

The UK government acknowledged in David Anderson QC’s December 2017 “independent assessment” of counter-terrorism procedures that Butt had been “the principal subject of an MI5 priority investigation for almost two years” at the time of his attack.² The 18 February 2018 *Sunday Times* revealed that he “was under surveillance on the night of the atrocity and had earlier staked out crowds at Trafalgar Square and Oxford Street as possible targets. Intelligence officers secretly watched Khuram Butt and his two accomplices load a hire van”, including with 14 five-litre plastic jerry cans reportedly rigged as petrol bombs, “...just two hours before the vehicle was used as a deadly battering ram.” The *Times* repeated the official line that MI5 “did not order police to move in on the suspects because Butt had been downgraded as an MI5 priority and they did not realise he was about to embark on a killing spree.” But as AAS asked at the time³, why was Butt under close surveillance if his threat status had truly been downgraded?

Butt and one of his accomplices, Rachid Redouane, were members of the outlawed extremist group al-Muhajiroun. Butt was close to al-Muhajiroun’s leader, Anjem Choudary, who was jailed in August 2016 for his role in recruiting some 500 jihadists for the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist group—to fight in Libya and Syria for the British government’s shared objective of regime change—only to be released in October 2018 after serving less than half of his five-and-a-half-year sentence, despite having also threatened violence against the British public. From 1986 until 2005 al-Muhajiroun was party to the “covenant of security” under which MI5/MI6 let various international terrorist groups base themselves in London, so long as they did not carry out attacks on British soil. The arrangement formally ended after the 7 July (“7/7”) 2005 London subway bombings, in which al-Muhajiroun members were involved. But little has changed in practice: Anderson reported that MI5’s official reason for not acting against Butt was that he was thought likely to travel abroad to join ISIS, rather than attack at home.

In January 2016 Butt and other al-Muhajiroun members (one of whom, Siddhartha Dhar, would later become an ISIS executioner) appeared in a TV documentary called *The Jihadis Next Door*, praying before an ISIS flag and distributing extremist propaganda. And the 28 May 2019 *Guardian*, citing testimony to the inquest from Acting Detective Chief Inspector Wayne Jolley of the Metropolitan Police’s counter-terrorism command, reported that in September 2015 Butt’s brother-in-law had reported him to an anti-terrorism hotline, after he defended ISIS for burning a captured Jordanian pilot to death in a propaganda video. He had also been arrested several times.

Protected species

Yet as the *Independent*’s security correspondent Lizzie Dearden reported 29 May, none of this apparently turned up in a compulsory pre-employment background check when Butt went to work carrying out security inspections for London’s subway service. Under questioning at the inquest, Acting DCI Jolley acknowledged that Butt’s job “gave him access to a London Underground station in a security capacity”. According to the *Guardian* Butt had access to several “sensitive” stations, including Westminster.

On 1 June Dearden reported Jolley’s denial that his colleagues had missed opportunities to prevent the attack, since they could only work on the basis of the intelligence they had. When the police’s legal counsel asked whether there was any evidence of attack planning in the months prior to June 2017, Jolley replied: “Not that we uncovered, sir, no.” (Emphasis added.)

And that is precisely the point. Dearden quoted Gareth Patterson QC, representing victims’ families, who rightly observed to Jolley that “the attack planning was there to be detected” by any “reasonably competent surveillance”. But it was MI5 that had Butt under surveillance, not the Met; and the police are compelled by law both to cede jurisdiction to MI5 on “national security” cases, and to keep quiet about MI5 operations—no matter how many innocents its agents kill. As the 21 August 2016 *Telegraph* reported, MI5 had repeatedly prevented the Met from arresting Choudary until 2015 despite his followers having committed brutal terrorist attacks, including the 2013 murder of British soldier Lee Rigby by public beheading in a London street. A Met counter-terrorism officer told the *Telegraph*: “I am gobsmacked that we allowed him to carry on as long as long as he did. He was up to

his neck in it, but *the police can't do full investigations on people if the security service say they are working on a really big job*, because they have the priority. That is what they did constantly." (Emphasis added.)

There can now be little doubt that the same is true in the case of Khuram Butt.

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Footnotes

1. In British (and Australian) intelligence parlance, a full-time salaried employee of an intelligence service is called an "officer", while "agent" refers to any other person employed (with or without pay) in any other capacity, e.g. as an informant or agitator.
2. "London/Manchester terrorism report a whitewash", *AAS*, 13 Dec. 2017.
3. "MI5's London Bridge lie exposed", *AAS*, 28 Feb. 2018.