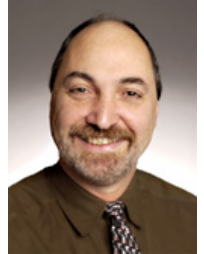


London Bomb Plot: Better Tools for Defense, but Will We Use Them?

By James Lewis, Director, Technology and Public Policy Program

August 14, 2006



No one should have been surprised by the news from London that 21 British Muslims were in the final stages of carrying out a spectacular attack on transatlantic airlines. We are far from victory in any war against terrorism.

What can we conclude from this latest effort by the jihadis? First, they remain skillful, inventive opponents. The use of liquid explosives in hand luggage shows some thought on their part in identifying chinks in the safeguards put in place around air travel. The operation shows a continued ability to exploit global travel and communications networks, allowing jihadis to plan and coordinate in Pakistan for an attack in Britain. And the supply of recruits for murder and suicide remains ample.

The planned bombings highlight the strange disconnect between European opinion and the jihadi threat. The weekend before the arrests, crowds marched through London with banners saying, "We are all Hezbollah now." The jihadis do not share this fuzzy notion. Home Secretary John Reid said in a speech on terrorism last week, that Britain's media, legal establishment, and commentariat 'don't get' the immediacy and danger of the terrorist threat. We can share the reluctance of those in the UK to admit that the era of peace promised by the Cold War's end is shattered, but we should not share their hope that jihadis can be appeased or conflict avoided.

However, the UK's success also points to progress in this war. Many countries have refocused and reenergized their intelligence and security services. The work of these services, and not airport screening, is the main defense against terror attacks. The ability to identify and disrupt terrorist plans before they get to the airport or train station is the key to countering attacks – and there is no doubt that more attacks will be attempted.

The arrests show that surveillance – of travel, finance, and communications – is essential for defense. The reliance of the jihadis on global travel and communications is a vulnerability. We must take advantage of this. The networks have given al-Qaeda and its followers a global presence but they also create the opportunity for Western intelligence services to intercept and disrupt their operations. These networks are our creation, and we should be able to find ways to use them against terrorists more effectively than the terrorists use them against us.

The arrests also show that international cooperation – in this case between the UK, Pakistan, and the U.S. - is much stronger than it was five years ago. A national counter-terror effort alone will not prevent attacks by a jihad that is spread across the Middle East, Europe, and Asia. The building of this cooperation has been one of the unspoken successes of the international community in response to terrorism. Sustaining this cooperation in the face of the growing hostility to the U.S. found in Europe and other regions will be a major challenge.

The combination of surveillance, international cooperation and energetic action by security services that emerged in response to September 11 is what thwarted the plan to blow up twelve airliners over the Atlantic. This success is encouraging and, with luck and a little more skill, we may have the ingredients of a defense that can frustrate the attacks of global jihad. Victory in the war on terror will require more, however. It will require convincing both jihadis and western skeptics that the ideology of an Islam oppressed by the West whose only defense is terror is false and that

restoring the Caliphate is no solution. Murder and airline bombings are a symptom of this larger ideological struggle and, as in the previous struggles against fascism and communism, the obstacles to success include not only the beliefs of our opponents but our own self-doubt about the values of the West.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in these publications should be understood to be solely those of the authors.