

The Manchester Bombing: A Case of State Criminal Negligence or Worse?

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The news that the American Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) had warned Britain's security service (MI5) about Salman Abedi, the man accused of the recent suicide bombing atrocity in the English city of Manchester, once again raises the issue of the role of Western intelligence services in the conduct of the so-called war on terror.

The commission of terrorist acts such as occurred in Manchester have invariably formed the basis for the justification of initiating fresh military intervention or bolstering existing military deployments. They also serve as the setting for the implementation of laws which since the September 11th attacks in the United States have incrementally eroded the sum rights and freedoms enjoyed by citizens in the Western world.

The risk of war and further loss of their freedoms make it incumbent on the citizens of these countries to be better informed about the workings of those agencies tasked with protecting their nations from internal threats such as acts of terrorism. The average Western citizen should be concerned about a disturbingly consistent pattern of acts of terror perpetrated by suspects who were either being monitored by national security establishments or who had served as double-agents and informers. Thus, it is important that they are able to be adequately informed so that they are able to assess and make judgements as to whether the strategies being employed to manage the the threat of terror are fundamentally flawed or point to something more sinister.

Recent revelations by the British *Mail on Sunday* newspaper that the FBI had sent a message to MI5 in January of 2017 stating that Salman Abedi, the suicide bomber responsible for the carnage at a concert in Manchester on May 22nd, was part of a North African-based cell of the so-called Islamic State "plotting to strike a political target in the UK" raise deeply disturbing questions. For one, they stand in stark contrast to the announcement by Prime Minister Theresa May that Abedi, who she claimed was known by the security services only "to a degree" had acted as a "lone wolf".



The official narrative of the British state is that Abedi (image on the right) was investigated but that no evidence of suspicious activities was found and that he simply dropped off the radar. However, the details presently known about Abedi and his family as well as the relationship between the security services and known Islamists in Manchester point to the implausibility of a genuine investigation yielding little on Abedi.

Abedi, whose parents belonged to the al-Qaeda affiliated Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), was an absentee University student who utilized a student loan to finance travel expenses and to pay rents at various addresses. He travelled freely to a number of European Union countries as well as to countries in the Middle East and North Africa region including Syria and Libya.

Libya, the homeland of his parents, is of course the country where the British government was instrumental in the Nato action which led to the overthrow of Colonel Muamar Gaddafi. While it is well-known that members of the British special forces regiment, the SAS, was involved in training and directing the attacks of the LIFG in the anti-Gaddafi insurrection of 2011, a less known aspect is the role played by MI5 in the recruitment of Islamists from the Manchester area to fight for this guerrilla movement.

Young men who were under state surveillance and control orders were approached and the idea of fighting against the Gaddafi government broached. Those who agreed had restrictions lifted and were allowed to travel to Libya. It is a state of affairs which apparently continued. They were allowed to continue traveling to Libya, which today is a lawless state dominated by Islamist militias, as well as to other destinations including Syria, a country against which Britain, in alliance with Nato and the Sunni Gulf monarchies, has sought to effect regime change.

It is clear that MI5 has utilised the services of radicalised Muslims like Abedi in this endeavour. The modus operandi followed by Britain and the Western alliance in their efforts to overthrow the Ba'athist government of Syria, like Gaddafi's a secular one, is to fund and train insurgent Islamists. This policy was exposed with devastating clarity in 2015 with the collapse of the trial on charges of terrorist offences of Bherlin Gildo, a Swedish national. The Old Bailey was informed that the charges which centred on Gildo's activities in Syria would have caused deep embarrassment to Britain's intelligence services because of their covert support for anti-Assad militias, the overwhelming majority of which are Islamist in agenda.

So far as Abedi is concerned, the evidence points to the intelligence services following a tried pattern of establishing individual contacts and relationships with terror networks as part of the goal of overthrowing governments earmarked as anti-Western.

These individuals and groups effectively become what are known in the parlance of the

intelligence world as 'assets'. They receive protection from the state in a variety of ways including the issuance of passports and untrammelled passage through airports.

A former Libyan rebel named Belal Younis told the *Middle East Eye* news site that he was the beneficiary of such protection at the time MI5 was recruiting anti-Gaddafi rebels in 2011. He recalled one episode where his interrogation by counter-terrorism police officers in an airport lounge was aborted after the intervention of an MI5 officer who waved him through and who later informed him that he had "sorted it out".

Specific evidence of similar personal contacts between Salman Abedi and officials of the security service have not materialised. But the circumstances which enabled him to travel freely and to evade official surveillance is remarkably clear.

It is useful to provide some documented examples of situations where acts of terror were committed by individuals who were either being monitored by national security establishments or who had been previously functioning as double-agents and informers.

Mohamed Merah, the man claimed to have carried out terror shootings in Toulouse and Montauban, was for long rumoured to have been a double agent and informer for the DCRI, a counter-terrorism and counter-espionage state intelligence body which effectively serves as France's equivalent to the FBI.

Merah's father claimed that this was the case. His son sent him two separate clips of 20 minutes length in which he detailed his connections to French intelligence while he was surrounded by special forces in a Toulouse apartment. The respective items of footage were sold by Merah senior to the French authorities for 30,000 Euros; money which he then used to buy land in his native Algeria to which he was expelled.

During the siege, CNN reported that Merah had boasted to French police that he had been trained by al-Qaeda in Waziristan, a tribal area where many European jihadists have gone. Merah had travelled to various Middle Eastern countries as well as to Central Asia. The French authorities even claimed that he briefly visited Israel. The idea was that French agents agreed to allow Merah to travel freely in return for information on Islamist terror cells.

Yves Bonnet, a former head of the now dissolved domestic counter-espionage service DST, confirmed to the Toulouse newspaper *La Depeche du Midi* that Merah had worked as an informer saying:

He was known to the DCRI, not especially because he was an Islamist, but because he had a correspondent in domestic intelligence. When you have a correspondent, it's not completely innocent. This is not trivial.



Across the Atlantic there is no shortage of cases with similar narratives. For instance, the Russian intelligence agency FSB informed the FBI that Tamerlan Tsarnaev (image on the left, source: Daily Mail) was a violent radical Islamist more than eighteen months before the bomb outrage at the Boston Marathon in April of 2013. Yet, according to a congressional report, the authorities missed numerous opportunities to detain Tsarnaev when he was travelling to and from Dagestan for training.

The lawyers defending Tsarnaev's younger brother who survived a police chase and shoot-out after the bombing constantly asked questions about the FBI's clandestine involvement with Tsarnaev. The opinion of many counter-terrorism experts and law enforcement officials is that Tamerlan Tsarnaev was for a period of time a federal informant. Tsarnaev, it appears, was a protected asset who somehow managed to avoid imprisonment despite his involvement in a triple murder case in 2011. The following year, he was allowed to travel to Russia using only residency documents and a passport issued in Kyrgyzstan even though he was on two terrorist watch lists. On his return, he was not subjected to additional security screening for persons with his immigration status who are away for a period exceeding six months.

In a book entitled *Maximum Harm: The Tsarnaev Brother, the FBI and the Road to the Marathon Bombing*, Michele McPhee, an award-winning investigative journalist theorizes that the federal government may have played a "direct role in creating the monster that Tamerlan Tsarnaev became". Her thesis is that Tsarnaev was an informant who turned on the United States after his request for citizenship was turned down. The FBI continues to deny that he worked as an informant but still refuses to reveal all the information it has under its control.

The FBI's use of a former Egyptian army officer named Emad Salem twenty years earlier as an informant tasked with infiltrating a group of Islamists who were later charged and convicted of the bomb attack on the World Trade Center also provides for an uncomfortable episode of state surveillance gone wrong. Salem, who was paid over a million dollars for his efforts, claimed that the bomb was built with the knowledge of FBI agents who assured him that the operation was a sting and agreed to foil the plot by supplying him with fake explosive materials. The FBI continue to deny foreknowledge of the attack.

It is a pattern continued in the case of Omar Mateen who massacred revellers at an Orlando nightclub in June of 2016. Mateen, whose father had long-time links with the CIA because of his role in Afghan politics, had been officially subjected to two investigations by the FBI.

The comment by Yves Bonnet, the former DST head, that the relationship between an informer and a state is "not trivial" is one that citizens would be advised to ponder. The

control of presumed intelligence assets carry severe risks since as some suspect in the case of Tamerlan Tsarnaev, they may go “rogue” and commit acts of terrorism.

Once such relationships are established, it means that intelligence agencies have the capability of pursuing agendas which exceed the bounds of morality and legality. By this it is meant that state intelligence bodies may utilise terror groups as a means of fomenting terror with the objective of influencing public opinion.

The idea that the state can enable acts of terror against its own citizens either by allowing a planned act of terror by a group to go ahead or by instigating the terroristic enterprise itself is one which many refuse to accept.

Yet, evidence of state created and manipulated acts of terror is well-documented. The investigation conducted by Judge Felice Casson and the revelations of Vincenzo Vinciguerra, a convicted terrorist, about the role of Italian military intelligence in steering far Right groups to committing acts of terror shed light on the stage-managing of what in Italy was termed *la strategia della tensione*: a ‘strategy of tension’.

While in the specific context of the *anni di piombo* (‘years of lead’) this entailed directing neo-fascist groups such as *Ordine Nuovo* and *Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari* to commit outrages which were blamed on Left wing groups such as the *Brigate Rossi*, the overarching aim was to condition the response of the public, who would be suitably disgusted, enraged and fearful to turn to the state. In Vinciguerra’s words:

You had to attack civilians, the people, women, children, unknown people far from any political game. The reason was quite simple – to force the people to turn to the state for greater security.

The objective of state-manipulated terror thus is to use the resultant public emotion as the basis for enacting laws related to bolstering state powers. It enables the state to make decisions and follow policies which would be unlikely to be accepted by its citizens in the absence of such catastrophic events. These responses will be centred on curtailing the freedoms of citizens or justifying military action or both.

The purpose of the Northwoods Project which was approved by the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff in the early 1960s was that the public outcry expected to be caused by a series of contrived bombings and hijackings which were to be blamed on the government of Fidel Castro would provide the pretext for launching a military invasion of the island of Cuba.

On the specific matter of the use of surveilled suspects, informants and cultivated terror networks, the potential for state-engineered incidents is an entirely plausible one. And while not admitting that this was the case, a report prepared under the auspices of Human Rights Watch and Columbia Law School’s Human Rights Institute released in July of 2014 found that all but four of the most high-profile cases of domestic terrorism which had occurred in the United States in the decade after the 9/11 attack of 2001 featured the “direct involvement” of government agents or informants. To quote the report:

All of the high-profile domestic terrorism plots of the last decade, with four exceptions, were actually FBI sting operations -plots conducted with the direct involvement of law enforcement informants or agents, including plots that were proposed or led by informants. According to multiple studies, nearly 50

per cent of the more than 500 federal counter-terrorism convictions resulted from informant-based cases; almost 30 per cent of those cases were sting operations in which the informant played an active role in the underlying plot.



Among the four exceptions is claimed to be the Boston Marathon bombing which as explained earlier is still plagued by highly contentious allegations that the perpetrator was an FBI informant. Nonetheless, the report called into question the post-9/11 shift taken by the FBI and other law enforcement agencies toward stopping terrorist plots before they occur. It went as far as to suggest that some operations had morphed into manufacturing threats.

The FBI itself has a history replete with intrigues which captured its operatives in situations where the agency actively engaged in fomenting violence. The COINTELPRO policy which aimed to disrupt and discredit dissident social and political organisations involved using agents tasked with widening the rift between Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, and his former apostle Malcolm X. The tactics employed contributed to the eventual assassination of Malcolm X. Three decades later, the Bureau would employ the services of an agent provocateur to entice one of Malcolm X's daughters into a conspiracy to kill Louis Farrakhan, a later leader of the organisation who for many years remained steadfastly unrepentant about his role in inciting Malcolm X's murder.

The involvement of actors controlled by the British state in acts of terror were a strong feature of the counter-insurgency policy employed in the 'low-intensity war' with republican militias during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. This strategy involved the use of loyalist terror organisations as proxies.

During that conflict, a stage was reached where state and military intelligence organisations were controlling key actors among both republican and loyalist terror groups. It is alleged by Kevin Fulton, a British-controlled IRA-infiltrator, that the security forces had agents embedded within the 'Real IRA' at the time of the Omagh bombing atrocity of 1998. Fulton, whose name is the pseudonym of Peter Keely, an intelligence corp soldier and member of

the army's Force Research Unit, was prevented from giving evidence at the trial of a man charged with the bombing. To date, no one has been convicted of the bombing and the authorities continue to refuse to hold a public inquiry.

The evidence so far assembled of the security services giving support to people who are connected to radical Islamist organisations is something about which Britons and other Western Europeans must be concerned. While each atrocity is met with the inevitable response that society will remain unbowed and unchanged, the stark reality is that there has been a steady diminution of their hard won rights and freedoms since the inauguration of the so-called war on terror.

They are being asked to get used to the idea of having the army deployed on the streets of mainland Britain and of the introduction of internment. Another outrage may mean that Britain may opt to follow France which is effectively under a permanent state of emergency.

And with revelations that the perpetrators of many key terror events in the United Kingdom and in places such as France may have been intelligence assets or had records of being surveilled by state intelligence agencies, it is time for the general public to be cautious about accepting the typical official response which affixes blame on the limitations of available resources or on undocumented investigations purporting to have found no evidence against future terrorists.

It is time for the public to put pressure on the government to re-think its strategy on combating terrorism, a move which must involve acknowledging that overthrowing Arab secular governments such as in Libya and the continuing attempt to do so in Syria have created the circumstances enabling the spread of radical Islamism and a corresponding increase in the threat of terrorism.

Failure to do so and a continued adherence to a mindset conditioned to think that their government and state security apparatuses are benign and benevolent institutions incapable of acting against the public interest will ensure that they will continue to be enslaved by the emotional manipulation intended by terrorist outrages which give politicians the licence to take away their hard won rights and freedoms as well as to enter into endless foreign conflicts.

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