

Two “sting” operations raise disturbing questions about US terror alert

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Two “sting” operations involving the US and Pakistan have raised disturbing new questions about the latest terror alert, and the so-called “war on terrorism” as a whole.

The first was a major international operation against the Al Qaeda network, involving intelligence agencies in a number of different countries, including the US, Britain and Pakistan. The second was strictly a US trap sprung by the FBI against immigrants in Albany, New York.

Taken together, these two operations provide fresh confirmation that the first priority of the US “war on terrorism” is to terrorize the American people in order to achieve political ends, even at the cost of aiding and abetting real acts of terror.

The major sting operation centered on the figure of Mohammad Naeem Noor Khan, the 25-year-old computer expert arrested by Pakistani security forces in Lahore last month. On August 1, top Bush administration officials released his name, claiming that he was the principal source of the information that led to last week’s raising of the terror alert level from yellow to orange in New York City, Washington, D.C., and Newark, New Jersey. The officials described his computer as a “treasure trove” of data on Al Qaeda’s operations and potential US targets of terrorist attacks.

It was subsequently revealed that information on the computer pointing to the surveillance of financial institutions in the US was several years old, predating the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington, and that there was no intelligence pointing to any imminent threat or terrorist plot.

The media lavished coverage on official government warnings and unsubstantiated claims given by unidentified intelligence officials that other undisclosed intelligence pointed to a pending attack. While helping to stoke an atmosphere of hysteria, the major news outlets largely ignored what was undoubtedly the most substantive story to come out of the official fear campaign and police-state security measures mounted by Washington.

Mohammed Naeem Noor Khan, whose name the White House first leaked to the *New York Times*, was at the time working for Pakistani intelligence as a covert agent. After his capture, he agreed to continue functioning as a key communications link between far-flung Al Qaeda operatives. Using encrypted e-mail, he was luring senior Al Qaeda officials into the open so that they could be arrested by Pakistani, US and British intelligence agents.

By publicizing his name, the Bush administration exposed the secret anti-terrorist operation. Pakistani government officials reported Tuesday that the disclosure of Khan’s month-old arrest had alerted Al Qaeda to the sting and allowed several top figures in the organization to escape.

“Let me say that this intelligence leak jeopardized our plan and some Al Qaeda suspects ran away,” a senior Pakistani official told the Associated Press. Describing the publication of Khan’s name as “very disturbing,” the official said that “coalition partners” should investigate how “classified information” about Khan’s arrest was published in the US press.

British intelligence officials were also reportedly furious over the White House leak. The disclosure of Khan’s name forced them to terminate an ongoing investigation of alleged Al Qaeda suspects in England with whom Khan was in communication, and hastily organize their arrests. According to press reports, five suspects eluded capture after the operation was blown, and British officials fear they may not have enough evidence to hold 13 who were rounded up.

Writing an opinion column in the *Observer*, British Home Secretary David Blunkett criticized Washington’s handling of its terror alerts in remarkably caustic and blunt terms. Citing media complaints in Britain “that we don’t say enough...we don’t sufficiently raise the profile, and therefore the concern about terrorism,” Blunkett issued a stinging indictment of the Bush administration’s attempts to terrorize the American public.

“[I]n the United States there is often high-profile comment followed, as in the most current case, by detailed scrutiny, with the potential risk of inviting ridicule,” he wrote.

He continued: “Is that really the job of a senior cabinet minister in charge of counter-terrorism? To feed the media? To increase concern? To have something to say, whatever it is, in order to satisfy the insatiable desire to hear somebody saying something. Of course not. This is arrant nonsense.”

Insisting that there are “very good reasons” to keep some information from the public, Blunkett delivered an unmistakable denunciation of the Bush administration’s sabotage of the Pakistani sting operation, as well as Washington’s public statements regarding those arrested in Britain. “Firstly, we do not want to undermine in any way our sources of information, or share information which could place investigations in jeopardy. Second, we do not want to do or say anything which would prejudice any trial.”

In an accompanying article, the *Observer* reported that “there has also been dismay in Whitehall at the willingness of American sources to comment openly on the British cases, amid concerns that the extradition to the US of one of those arrested could be jeopardized.”

On the same day that Blunkett’s column was published, US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice defended the administration’s handling of the Khan affair. In an interview on CNN, Rice declared, “Well, I don’t know what might have been going on in Pakistan. I will say this, we did not of course, publicly disclose his name,” adding that they had merely leaked it “on background.”

Anyone familiar with the methods employed by the media and their government sources knows that “on background” means the information may be published, but the identity of the source must be withheld. Rice is herself among the most frequent conduits for “background” information that the administration makes public, while insisting that it be attributed to unnamed “senior officials.”

Rice maintained that the administration was “trying to strike a balance between giving enough information to the public so that they know that

you're dealing with a specific, credible, different kind of threat" and "operational considerations."

The episode has led to a storm of criticism by security experts, both in the US and abroad. The leaking of Khan's name has been described as a "fiasco," "setback" and even "disaster," while some commentators talk of the administration having "shot itself in the foot."

"The whole thing smacks of incompetence or worse," Tim Ripley, a British security analyst who writes for *Jane's Defense* publications, told Reuters. "You have to ask: what are they doing compromising a deep mole within Al Qaeda when it's so difficult to get these guys in there in the first place?"

Why did Washington compromise the mole? Gross incompetence and the basest political calculations certainly cannot be excluded when dealing with the Bush White House. There is no doubt that the incessant warnings about a terrorist threat are meant to scare the public and gain political advantage against Bush's Democratic challenger, John Kerry.

Moreover, the invocation of terrorism—by Democrats and Republicans alike—has served for nearly three years as the ideological underpinning of all the actions taken by the government, both war abroad and attacks on democratic rights and social conditions at home.

Faced with mounting skepticism over the latest alert, the administration was clearly eager to provide the media with fresh confirmation of an imminent threat. However, the argument that the administration exposed Khan's identity to bolster its case for a terror alert is unconvincing. How did exposing Khan make the supposed threat any more credible?

The alternative explanation is that elements within the US security apparatus made a decision to blow up the Pakistani sting operation. The exposure was not a chance slip by a single official, but a deliberate policy that included a concerted media blitz by the administration to tout the "treasure trove" in Khan's computer.

The question is, what was the motive for terminating the Khan operation? Two answers suggest themselves: either the sting was getting too close to Al Qaeda operatives that at least some in Washington did not want to see captured, or it was threatening to disrupt another operation that they wanted to see completed.

This is an administration that utilized the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks as the justification for all of its policies since—most particularly, the long-planned war to conquer Iraq and its oil fields. Ample evidence suggests that this *casus belli* did not fall out of the blue.

There was the failure to act on repeated warnings of the September 11 plot; there was the failure to monitor the activities of the hijackers, including at least two who were known to US intelligence and operated openly under their own names in the US; and, finally, there was the virtual stand-down of all US air defenses and flight security in advance of the hijacking. All raise the question: Was this a matter of criminal negligence, or was a deliberate decision taken to either permit or actively assist in the carrying out of a terrorist attack on US soil in order to create popular support for war?

The current sabotage of a multi-national operation against Al Qaeda raises similar questions: Have elements within the US administration been warned about another attack, and are they prepared to allow it to take place in order to terrorize the American people into reelecting Bush—or provide a pretext for canceling the November election?

The second "sting" operation uncovered this week was on a much smaller scale. It involved two Muslim immigrant residents of Albany, New York, who were lured by an FBI informant into a convoluted scheme that allegedly involved talk of purchasing a rocket-propelled grenade launcher to assassinate the Pakistani ambassador to the United Nations.

No real plot ever existed—it was entirely an invention of the FBI. A Pakistani immigrant was arrested by the FBI on charges of helping other non-English-speaking immigrants obtain driver's licenses by accompanying them to their written tests and feeding them the right

answers. Charged with document fraud, he was promised that he would not be deported if he served as an informer, spying on a local mosque.

When a member of the mosque, a Bangladeshi immigrant, approached him for a loan to bail out his failing pizzeria, the FBI sprung its trap. According to the indictment, the informer enticed the Bangladeshi, Mohammed Mosharref Hossain, and an Iraqi Kurdish refugee, Yassin Muhiddin Aref, into agreeing to launder money from the supposed sale of the grenade launcher. In return, they were to receive \$5,000.

To bolster its flimsy case, the government has accused the Bangladeshi of saying that he supported Jamaat-e-Islami, which it described as a "terrorist organization." In fact, it is a political party and a partner in the country's coalition government. The Justice Department has also claimed that the Kurdish refugee's name was found by US troops in a notebook in northern Iraq.

The "terrorist plot," which, as one defense lawyer pointed out, existed only "in the imagination of the government," was trumpeted by the media. Initial reports went so far as to claim that the Kurdish background of one of the defendants revealed the presence in the US of a cell run by the alleged mastermind of Islamic fundamentalist attacks in Iraq, Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi.

The FBI sting in Albany was sharply condemned by the Pakistani government. A spokesman for the Pakistani Foreign Office described the FBI entrapment of immigrants in an invented scheme to assassinate a Pakistani diplomat as "mind-boggling" and a "bizarre mission." He said that his government had filed a formal diplomatic protest with Washington.

"This has increased our ambassador's and our mission's vulnerability. This technique and methodology are tantamount to auto-suggestion and could have endangered the life of our ambassador," the spokesman added.

It is revealing that, in the midst of a terror alert in three major cities and a nationwide attempt by the government and media to whip up fear and hysteria, the only significant arrests conducted in the US are of people lured into a phony plot invented by the government itself.



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