

Convicted bumbling bombers facing life

Sean O'Neill and David Sanderson, The Times, February 23, 2013

THREE men who wanted to carry out "another 9/11 or 7/7" on the streets of Britain face life in jail after being found guilty of terror offences.

Irfan Naseer, 31, Irfan Khalid, 27, and Ashik Ali, 27, were the al-Qa'ida-trained ringleaders of a cell that wanted to cause death and mayhem using explosives, firearms and poisons.

The trio, from Sparkhill in Birmingham, were convicted of 12 charges of preparing acts of terrorism after a four-month trial at London's Woolwich Crown Court.

When their bomb factory was raided in September 2011, they had not decided on their targets. But they had discussed killing British soldiers, murdering young women because of the way they dressed and carrying out rucksack bombings in crowded places.

Police found a partially burnt bomb-making recipe drawn up by Naseer, a chemistry graduate.

Naseer and Khalid received terrorism training in Pakistan during two visits. They recorded "martyrdom videos", left with al-Qa'ida contacts and to be released after they accomplished their missions.

Judge Richard Henriques said it was clear the group was planning "a terrorist outrage" in Birmingham. "You were seeking to recruit a team of somewhere between six and eight suicide bombers to carry out a spectacular bombing campaign, one which would create an anniversary along the lines of 7/7 or 9/11," Justice Henriques said.

The court was told that the scale of the terror cell's ambition was huge. They thought that the July 2005 London attacks, which killed 52 people, had "gone a bit wrong" because the bombers had not packed their devices with nails.

The group talked of machinegun assaults on synagogues, filling rucksacks with explosives, killing British soldiers and smearing poisoned handcreams on car door handles to "kill about 1000 people".

From the online al-Qa'ida magazine Inspire, they took the idea of fitting a truck with blades and driving into a crowd of female charity workers. Khalid was caught by a listening device, boasting: "We are doing it in the land of the Shaytan (Devil), in the whale's belly, it is going to shake them all."

On another occasion, as he drove his car, Khalid shouted to his passengers: "It's the four suicide bombers, driving around ready to take on England."

Behind the bravado, however, was a level of incompetence that could have featured in the black comedy film *Four Lions*. The men siphoned off £20,000 (\$29,670) from Muslim Aid street collections, with which they intended to speculate on foreign exchange markets and build up funds to buy weapons. But turmoil in the eurozone meant that their associate, Rahin

Ahmed, lost £9000. One £3000 reversal occurred while he was away from his computer making a cup of tea.

An ingredient for their bombs was to have come from sports injury cold packs, but they bought the wrong type, containing urea rather than ammonium nitrate. They shopped for components on eBay using the email address "be-terror@yahoo.co.uk" and the username "terrorshop".

Alarmed, the police and MI5 mounted an investigation that, at its peak, involved 400 police and intelligence agents.

Naseer and Khalid had been to "the heart of the beast", as one security source put it, attending al-Qa'ida camps near Miram Shah in north Waziristan. There they had learnt how to make and detonate bombs and immersed themselves in the writings of US-born extremist cleric Anwar al-Awlaki.

Referring to cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, Naseer said in his intended suicide video: "You people think that by making this cartoon of the Prophet you're going to defame him - no, you'll never achieve this. The only thing you'll achieve is suicide bombers on your streets, spilling so much blood that you will remember, you'll have nightmares for the rest of your miserable lives."

Khalid said on his video: "This is revenge for everything. What we're doing is another 9/11."

There was no "command and control" from al-Qa'ida in Pakistan. They were left to select their own targets.

The men flew back from Pakistan in June 2011, but MI5 was watching closely. They heard Naseer raging at his friends: "Why shouldn't we terrorise them ... slags everywhere and these whores ... having sex like donkeys on the street ... it's Allah's Earth."

Detective Inspector Adam Gough, of West Midlands counter-terrorism unit, said: "They discussed how much chemicals they would need. Naseer referred to 'seven or eight in different places - boom, boom, boom'."

The crunch came in September 2011 when the group began to use Ali's flat and MI5 heard discussions about bomb-making ingredients and detonation methods.

A security source said: "We believed they were just days or weeks away from making a viable device." Police moved in late on September 18, 2011, as the cell leaders drove to pick up a takeaway meal.

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Jihad's lair in middle England

David Sanderson and Sean O'Neill, *The Australian*, February 23, 2013

SPARKHILL is, in many ways, typical of inner-city, 21st-century Britain in the age of austerity. The swimming pool is closed, money-transfer bureaux jostle with pawn shops in Stratford Road and the fast-food cartons tumbling in the gutters suggest street cleaning has been hit by cuts.

But scratch the surface in this corner of Birmingham and you find somewhere quite different from the rest of modern Britain. Life here is lived by the rules and allegiances of the rural Kashmiri community where most local families have their origins.

Dig a little deeper and you will also find a deep well of Islamist extremism and a widespread acceptance of jihad.

In 2000, a year before September 11, an al-Qa'ida bomb factory and a stockpile of HMTD explosive was discovered here. Moinul Abedin, the would-be bomber, was jailed for 20 years.

Eight years later, five men were jailed for a plot to kidnap and behead a British soldier home on leave from Afghanistan. Yesterday three ringleaders of a suicide bomb plot were convicted.

Scores of young men from these streets have travelled abroad for jihad and hundreds of thousands of pounds have been raised to finance Mujaheddin groups. The Maktabah bookshop was not just a gathering place for local radicals but a place known internationally for publishing and distributing jihadi propaganda.

The guilty verdicts on three local men are an example of the continued militancy in the area, but also an indication that despite spending hundreds of millions of pounds, the government's Prevent strategy - designed to steer the young away from extremism and improve community links with the police - has made few inroads.

Veterans of Britain's battles against terrorism liken Sparkhill, and parts of East London, to the Falls Road, the Republican heartland of West Belfast. The community may not support the hardliners in their midst, but neither do they trust the authorities.

When Irfan Naseer, the leader of the terrorist group, sent four young men for training in Pakistan's tribal areas, he met angry opposition in Sparkhill.

One man, identified in court proceedings only as Jimmy, confronted Naseer and warned him that the four "travellers" must be brought back. A relative of one of the men sent off to Pakistan told Naseer that "he would get a bullet in his head" if anything happened to the man.

The four were sent back from the training camps within 48 hours. But at no point did anyone tell the authorities they were concerned about jihad.

A businessman, Rafiq Khan, said he understood the community's silence. He said: "Why would people tell police about suspicions? They would fall under suspicion themselves."

Usama Hasan, of the anti-extremism think tank Quilliam, said the Muslim community in Birmingham "almost live in their own world".

"Quite often when things like this go on they don't report them outside the community," he said. "The police are often seen as outsiders and the state as the enemy."

A former police anti-terror officer said the silence spoke volumes: "Prevent has been in place for seven years now and has cost hundreds of millions of pounds but, in my experience, it has not produced a single piece of intelligence that helped us intercept a live plot."

Ian Ward, deputy leader of Birmingham council, said: "Prevent is a long-term strategy, not a quick fix. We need to continue building it to rebuild confidence."

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