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London July 7th 2005: Preliminary Analysis

Summary

- **Four explosive devices detonate on London's transport network in a co-ordinated terrorist attack – 3 underground trains and 1 bus are impacted towards the end of the morning rush hour.**
- **The exact number of fatalities is unknown.**
- **A group calling itself the *Secret Organisation of the al-Qaeda Jihad in Europe* claims responsibility for the attacks – the authenticity of this claim remains unverified but al-Qaeda (AQ) involvement is widely suspected.**
- **No arrests have yet been made.**
- **Emergency service responses have been rapid and effective.**

The claim of responsibility and al-Qaeda

It is as yet too early to definitively judge the validity of the statement posted on the prominent radical website al-Qalaa in the hours following the attack, and there remains the possibility that further statements and claims be issued. In the aftermath of the Madrid bombings there were two claims: the first (which is now discredited) by the Abu Hafs al-Masri brigade, and the second by the previously unknown "al-Qaeda in Europe Organization" (which to date has not been authenticated). It is thus dangerous to jump to conclusions regarding the statement of 7th July.

We can however make several observations:

- The al-Qalaa website has previously posted statements and incited violence against the West lending credibility to the claim;
- The style and hasty posting of the statement clearly inscribe both the claim and the operation in the recent trend of AQ related attacks;
- Yet, if we as outside observers can ascertain these facts, so too can copycat groups bidding to emulate the ideologically powerful organization. The exponential development of forums and websites of those who dement Islam for their own radical ends illustrates the media and marketing savvy of modern day extremists. No previous intelligence indicated the existence of this new London cell, though the name is similar to the group whose spokesman, Abu Dujan al Afghani, claimed last year's Madrid attacks. Thus this new group (if it does exist) may well be one of the many eager to exploit the high profile and deadly London bombings for purely promotional purposes.

Thus there is reason to doubt the credibility of the July 7th statement. In the event – however – that the claim of responsibility is authentic and despite the use of the name "al-Qaeda" in the group's title, there is however little reason to believe that these attacks were directly overseen by those recognized by governments and the media as core figures in AQ. AQ is often described as having a newly-evolved decentralized command, but it appears more likely that an independent organization – perhaps with "AQ's" sanction but doubtfully under

their command – carried out the attack. The role of Osama bin Laden (OBL) and his supposed cronies since 9/11 appears more inspirational than operational, with individual copycat groups furthering the cause of their own volition.

Though there is little doubt that the attacks were carried out by Islamist radicals, only time and in depth investigations will reveal the precise identities and allegiances of their perpetrators.

London – Madrid: Tactical and Strategic Parallels

Significant tactical and strategic parallels between the Madrid bombings of March 11, 2004 and London's Tube Bombing point to AQ involvement.

Tactical similarities between the two events are at once apparent: Both attacks occurred with no warning. Operatives succeeded in concealing their plans from intelligence agencies. Multiple bombs were distributed throughout the public transportation network, and intended to detonate at the peak of local rush hour. It would appear that neither operation relied on suicide bombers. Each set of assailants relied on soft targets, in both cases, the vulnerable public transportation network. In London and Madrid, a successful attack required minimal pre-op surveillance.

Tactical replication is indicative of a strategic connection, which further enhances the likelihood that London's bombings were perpetrated by AQ. Past operations in Madrid, Nairobi, Mombasa and elsewhere indicate that each London bomber would have been in touch with a point man – directly in touch with AQ, or not – though individual bombers themselves may not have been aware of each other. This creates a unique set of problems for intelligence: one-man terror cells, or parallel networks operating in isolation from one another, can move about a city leaving only the most minimal evidence of their activities. As forensic activities proceed, the level of coordination among attackers will likely become apparent as bomb fragments are compared across blast sites.

Furthermore, a steep learning curve is integral to the strategy of AQ: successful attacks spawn similar attempts, failures spawn reforms resulting in successes. In April of 2004, one month after the Madrid bombings, two attacks on Spain's AVE were thwarted. The lesson from Madrid was clear to AQ: public transportation networks are easy targets, a lesson easily applicable in London.

Moving forward, London must be vigilant. The methodology and strategy of AQ indicates that after the success of July 7, more attacks on the public transportation system may follow. However, AQ's past opportunism also indicates that with increased surveillance – if authorities can manage to make a second tube bombing sufficiently difficult – AQ will likely abandon this prototype.

Tactics

It is still less than 30 hours since the London attacks. The tactics of the bombers will only become completely clear after the frantic investigation further unfolds, providing us with more details and additional certainties. From the details we currently have at our disposal, however, there are several extrapolations, or judgements that we can confidently make.

The explosives were designed to explode during rush hour and target London's commuters. The scale of the attack and the strategic timing - the opening day of the G8 Summit in Scotland – will have demanded a sophisticated level of planning, preparation and coordination. Despite the 'soft' nature of the targets, only a well-prepared group working

under considerable operational security would be able to carry out citywide attacks within a tight time-frame on infrastructure that would necessarily have a serious economic impact and a high casualty rate. The explosions all took place in the North-north-west quadrant of central London:

Explosion 1: 0851hrs – Circle Line train travelling westbound from Aldgate Station, the bomb detonated 100m into the tunnel, on its way to Liverpool Street Station. Around 10lbs of high explosive was left in some form of container on the floor of the 3rd carriage.

Explosion 2: 0856hrs – Piccadilly Line train travelling from Russell Square to King's Cross Station. This explosion was responsible for killing the highest number of passengers. Around 10lbs of high explosive was left in a container on the floor of the 1st carriage, at the 1st set of double doors.

Explosion 3: 0917hrs – Hammersmith and City Line travelling from Edgware Road towards Paddington Station. The bomb exploded as the train passed other trains blasting a hole in a wall and damaging at least one and possibly two other trains. Around 10lbs of high explosive was left in a container on the floor of the 2nd carriage, at the 1st set of double doors.

We have received reports that elements of timing devices have been found at some, perhaps all, of these sites – suggesting that the bombs were not command detonated. However, in the case of the first explosion, the Circle Line is a shallow "cut-and-cover" line – as such it would have been possible, in principle to use a mobile phone to detonate the device. The same goes for the third explosion, however, the depth of the Piccadilly line would render this process impossible in the second train explosion.

Each of the London Tube bombs appears designed to affect, or even target, some of London's busiest mainline stations. **1:** Liverpool St Station is a major local transport hub that contains a National Rail station serving southeast England. **2:** King's Cross is a vital National Rail hub for trains going to northern and eastern Britain and is also a major Underground and local transport interchange. **3:** Paddington is a major National Rail station serving south-western England and Wales.

The use of small amounts of explosive is a testament to its high quality and modern composition. Interestingly the blast injuries from these detonations do not include significant shrapnel wounds (apart from the glass from windows) rather wounds were as a result of the blast pressure. If they had been packed with 'dockyard confetti' they would certainly have caused even more injury. Perhaps the bombers were being extra vigilant against the possibility of metal detectors.

Explosion 4: (Anomaly) 0947hrs – the no. 30 bus near Tavistock Square, close to the Russell Square underground station, away from Euston station. There is much speculation regarding this attack. It went off nearly an hour after the Tube attacks. Was it a mistake? Did it detonate early? Did it detonate on time? Did it detonate too late? Was it too designed to explode on the underground? What was its means of detonation? Was it designed to target those commuters seeking to escape the Russell Square station? The bomb exploded at the back of the upper deck of the bus. This would be the least effective point from which to detonate the device – the more effective position would be the centre of the lower carriage. It is possible that the bomber got cold feet and left the bomb on the bus for fear of being compromised. There also remains a possibility that the detonator was a suicide bomber. This is highly contestable. These targets were soft targets, suicide bombers are usually reserved for harder targets – otherwise viewed as untouchable. There is a case to be made however, for the symbolic use of a suicide bomber in central London. This would be viewed by extremist leaders not as the senseless loss of personnel but as an example of spreading

the most outrageous form of its violent ideology – seen most days in Iraq – into one of the centres of the Western world. Further, with all the other attacks taking place underground, the London bus itself – a familiar city sight – could have been targeted for its visibility and somewhat iconic status.

In the Madrid bombings, it was highly likely that the terrorists were planning to carry out additional attacks inside Madrid however, they blew themselves up on discovery. If the London bombers remain free for long, and they still have explosive materials at their disposal the possibility that they are planning further near-term attacks cannot be overlooked.

Continuity and Resilience

With world markets rocked by the events in London their impact is tangible across the globe. Predictably, the attacks – unexpected and undetected by UK Government intelligence services – have serious security implications. Questions of inevitability, preventability and business continuity in the wake of such incidents proliferate. In particular, enormous pressure is now on the UK Government and its intelligence infrastructure – operating in an environment where a terrorist attack was expected but remained utterly unforeseen – to examine its collation and analysis of information prior to yesterday's events. Prevention must remain the pre-eminent approach to dealing with terrorism, but it is not guaranteed.

Yet, expected as such attacks are, a fatalistic resignation to the inevitable cannot be allowed to prevail. Terrorist attacks can be preventable. Time needed for planning and preparation allows intelligence services time to develop leads on suspects and intercept them. Moments of vulnerability at any stage during the planning process – movement of materials, communication between those involved – make potential attacks both deterrable and discoverable. It is certain that attacks have been prevented about which the public know nothing. Sensitive information precludes dissemination when it would likely impair its usefulness in future investigations.

While intelligence networks must always look to prevention, even as they are prepared for the realization of an attack, businesses cannot afford to overlook the development of robust strategies to manage the various impacts of terrorism: financial damage, physical damage, the loss of staff. Terrorism aims not only to inflict physical damage and casualties but to cause mass disruption through its destruction and the psychological dislocation of those affected. Resilience and continuity are vital in mitigating its impact. Proactive risk management in advance, through to the restoration of normality in the aftermath of an attack are one linked theme to be addressed collectively.

Following a day on which London experienced the most deadly terrorist attack yet perpetrated within the UK's borders and on which the FTSE 100 index fell dramatically – seeing the UK's largest companies lose £44bn of their value – resilience and continuity will be focussing the minds of many. Ultimately, with no arrests yet made the possibility that the London bombers are free and retain the capacity to carry out further attacks remains.