

# British Islamic extremist terrorism: the declining significance of Al-Qaeda and Pakistan

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The post-9/11 capability of Al-Qaeda and the role of Pakistan in directing terrorism in the UK have been matters of intense discussion for over a decade.<sup>1</sup> In November 2006 the Director General of the Security Service (commonly referred to as MI5) stated that her organization knew of up to 30 terrorist-related plots designed to kill UK citizens and damage the economy.<sup>2</sup> In May 2011 the Home Secretary presented a picture of the previous decade's security concerns as being broadly influenced by Al-Qaeda, adding: 'The leadership of al-Qaida continues to plan operations in the UK.'<sup>3</sup> In June 2012 the new head of MI5, Jonathan Evans, suggested the Arab Spring had facilitated a 'second coming' for Al-Qaeda. British would-be jihadists, he suggested, are now heading to the Middle East in pursuit of training, because 'parts of the Arab world have again become a permissive environment for Al-Qaeda'.<sup>4</sup> Counterterrorism officers believe that British Muslims waging combative jihad in Syria have the potential to link up with Al-Qaeda and pursue further terrorist activity in the UK.<sup>5</sup> As recently as January 2013, the Prime Minister David Cameron framed the current terrorist threat in terms of growing 'Al-Qaeda franchises'.<sup>6</sup> The public message from UK government is that Al-Qaeda remains a going concern.

<sup>1</sup> Bruce Hoffman, 'Al Qaeda, trends in terrorism, and future potentialities: an assessment', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 26: 6, 2003, pp. 429–42; Walter Enders and Todd Sandler, 'After 9/11 is it all different now?', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49: 2, 2005, pp. 259–77; Touqir Hussain, 'US–Pakistan engagement: the war on terrorism and beyond', United States Institute of Peace, Special Report 145, August 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Eliza Manningham-Buller, 'The international terrorist threat to the UK', speech given at Queen Mary's College, London, 9 Nov. 2006, <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/home/about-us/who-we-are/staff-and-management/director-general/speeches-by-the-director-general/the-international-terrorist-threat-to-the-uk.html>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Theresa May stated: 'The leadership of al-Qaida continues to plan operations in the U.K. They attract people for training; they have sections dedicated to overseas operations; they radicalize and recruit. And even as the capability of the al-Qaida leadership has reduced, other threats have emerged which, in the U.K., affect us directly. We've seen a wider range of terrorist groups active in and from Pakistan. Some are new, but rapidly growing. Others are well established': Council on Foreign Relations, 'A conversation with the Right Honorable Theresa May', 16 Sept. 2011, Washington DC, <http://www.cfr.org/uk/conversation-right-honorable-theresa-may/p25925>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Evans, quoted by Nick Hopkins, 'MI5 warns al-Qaida regaining UK toehold after Arab spring', *Guardian* online, 25 June 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2012/jun/25/mi5-uk-terrorism-threat-warning>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Private email between the author and a counterterrorism officer from SO 15, New Scotland Yard, 31 Oct. 2013.

<sup>6</sup> David Cameron, speech to the World Economic Forum, 24 Jan. 2013, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/prime-minister-david-camersons-speech-to-the-world-economic-forum-in-davos/>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

This assessment of Al-Qaeda is far from universal. The political sociologist and former US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officer Marc Sageman argues that the greatest danger comes not from Al-Qaeda, but from westernized Muslims undergoing the process of radicalization far from the tribal regions of Pakistan.<sup>7</sup> Inner-city areas of Birmingham, Luton, Leeds and London, he insists, are now the 'hotbeds of radicalisation'. On the basis of a dataset containing details of more than 500 Islamic terrorists around the world, Sageman suggests the organization behind 9/11 no longer exists as an operational entity and is of little importance.<sup>8</sup> The renowned terrorism scholar Bruce Hoffman disagrees. While acknowledging that second-generation Muslim immigrants are part of the problem, he rejects the proposition that Al-Qaeda is largely a spent force.<sup>9</sup> Hoffman argues that the organization continues to pose the most serious threat to western security.<sup>10</sup> He points to recently declassified intelligence estimates to suggest that Al-Qaeda's central leadership continues to plan high-impact plots.<sup>11</sup>

Undoubtedly the most comprehensive examination of Al-Qaeda in relation to the UK is Mitch Silber's 2009 book *The Al-Qaeda factor*.<sup>12</sup> Silber concludes that the group directed at least one major UK terrorist plot between 2003 and 2006.<sup>13</sup> Going one step further, Raffaello Pantucci, a senior fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), claims that Al-Qaeda directed as many as three plots. Citing decrypted files recovered in Germany in 2012, Pantucci is satisfied that operative Rashid Rauf guided two operations targeting the London Transport network in July 2005, as well as an attempt to detonate liquid explosives aboard transatlantic flights in the summer of 2006.<sup>14</sup>

How might we summarize the debate over the role that Al-Qaeda and Pakistan have played in British terrorism since 9/11? The protagonists in this debate may be loosely grouped into three camps along a spectrum of opinion. At one end sits Marc Sageman, significantly downplaying the role of Al-Qaeda in favour of bottom-up, autonomous, self-starting local networks radicalized far from the tribal regions of Pakistan. In the middle is Silber, accepting the bottom-up theory of self-starters, but arguing that these are eventually incorporated in a top-down working relationship between Al-Qaeda in Pakistan and British Muslims in the UK. At the other end of the spectrum sit Hoffman and Pantucci, both arguing that Al-Qaeda remains an active group, recruiting, radicalizing and directing British terrorists through a network of operatives and affiliates.

<sup>7</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless jihad: terror networks in the twenty-first century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Sageman, *Leaderless jihad*, p. 134.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Hoffman, 'The myth of grass-roots terrorism: why Osama bin Laden still matters', *Foreign Affairs* 87: 3, 2008, p. 133.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce Hoffman, 'A counter terrorism strategy for the Obama administration', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21: 3, 2010, pp. 359–37.

<sup>11</sup> Hoffman, 'The myth of grass-roots terrorism', p. 135.

<sup>12</sup> Mitch Silber, *The Al Qaeda factor: plots against the West* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup> Silber, *The Al Qaeda factor*, p. 276.

<sup>14</sup> Raffaello Pantucci, 'A biography of Rashid Rauf: Al-Qaeda's British operative', Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, 24 July 2012, <http://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/a-biography-of-rashid-rauf-al-qaidas-british-operative>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

Drawing largely upon recently obtained court transcripts, the present article contends that Al-Qaeda directed all four major UK terrorist plots between 2003 and 2006. However, when this campaign ended in 2006, so did Al-Qaeda's engagement in the UK. Degraded by American kinetic activity, Al-Qaeda's capacity collapsed. Since 2007, Al-Qaeda's attacks have largely been confined to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen. This suggests that the covert war fought by the United States, which has integrated an intense intelligence effort with aggressive special forces activity and drone strikes, has prevented terrorism being projected from the Middle East and South Asia. How far this campaign has simultaneously contributed to the indirect radicalization of individuals in the West is difficult to measure.<sup>15</sup>

Certainly, by 2011 Al-Qaeda as an organization was entirely absent from the UK. Evidence from five case-studies in conjunction with more recent incidents suggests that none of the above writers has adequately captured the evolving landscape. Hoffmann, Silber and Pantucci are correct in emphasizing the influence of Al-Qaeda, but this is true only for the years between 2003 and 2006. Thereafter the UK situation is better explained by Sageman's account, which suggests that Al-Qaeda has receded in importance. Although Kashmir continues to play a passive role in training jihadists, today British terrorists do what they can on their own. Few if any enjoy any top-down relationships with Al-Qaeda handlers in either the UK or Pakistan. Since late 2013, civil war in Syria has constructed a new and potentially far more dangerous terrorist threat to the UK. Police and security services have been alarmed by the significant number of British Muslims fighting on behalf of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS; latterly IS: Islamic State), who they fear may be ordered to return to the UK on suicide missions. Between January and October 2013 counterterrorism officers arrested 218 suspects in relation to IS and the continuing civil war in Syria.<sup>16</sup>

## **The UK Islamic fundamentalist movement**

Between 2003 and 2013, some 50 extremists have pursued at least six major terrorism plots targeting British citizens. Arguably, these men did not just suddenly decide to act. The evidence discussed here suggests that the majority followed a pathway that involved engagement with Islamic political activism, also referred to as Islamism. The term 'Islamic fundamentalist movement' (IFM) is used here to describe the environment from which Islamic extremist terrorism in the UK has emerged. Writing in 1993, the academic Sadik al-Azm described the ideology of insurgent groups emerging from post-Soviet Afghanistan as 'Islamic

<sup>15</sup> The literature is vast. See e.g. Seth G. Jones, *Hunting in the shadows: the pursuit of Al Qaeda since 9/11* (New York: Norton, 2013); Mark Mazzetti, *The way of the knife: the CIA, a secret army, and a war at the ends of the earth* (London: Penguin, 2013); Eric Rosenbach, *Find, fix, finish* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2012); David E. Sanger, *Confront and conceal: Obama's secret wars and surprising use of American power* (New York: Crown, 2012); Jeremy Scahill, *Dirty wars: the world is a battlefield* (New York: Nation Books, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Camber, 'Five Britons A WEEK are flying out to join jihadis, says Met chief Bernard Hogan-Howe', *Daily Mail Online*, 22 Oct. 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2802480/five-britons-week-flying-join-jihadis-says-met-chief.html>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

fundamentalism'.<sup>17</sup> In advocating the term to describe the underlying political ideology of Islamists, Al-Azm points to its liberal use by a prominent Egyptian author of armed insurrectionary Islamist publications. Followers of the fundamentalist movement subscribe to a socio-political ideology that began with the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1920s. Influenced by the writings of Sayyed Qutb, who feared globalization would corrupt Islamic society, fundamentalists remain active today and advocate the establishment of an Islamic caliphate governed according to shari'a law.

In the 1990s, the fundamentalist movement found a new lease of life after the end of the Cold War. Responding to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, Middle Eastern dictators clamped down heavily on ideologues. Consequently, preachers fled to Europe, receiving a warm welcome in the cities of London, Paris and Madrid. Men such as Abu Qatada, firmly established in east London, worked tirelessly to transplant the fundamentalist ideology into Muslim communities across the UK. However, contrary to the prevailing discourse, organized fundamentalist Muslims (as a movement) do not constitute a homogeneous set of individuals. Depending on factors such as age, overseas connections, experience of conflict and religiosity, each fulfils a specific task, which may be preaching, fundraising, combative jihad or facilitating and networking. It is from this environment that Islamic extremist terrorism has emerged. Specifically, in the process of either performing these tasks or engaging with those active in these four areas, a minority adopted an extremist position, one that eventually led to acts of terrorism in the UK. It is important to recognize that the majority of fundamentalists do not recognize the legitimacy of terrorism. Of the 150 men associated with the movement and convicted of terrorist offences between 2003 and 2013, in fact barely 26 per cent were guilty of pursuing violence against non-combatants.<sup>18</sup>

Islamic extremist terrorists are also relatively new to the UK. Before 2001, Muslims were rarely among the set of persons implicated, charged and convicted in respect of UK terrorism. At that time, the cause of Irish nationalism dominated the legal landscape in this area. Since 2001, however, second-generation Muslim men, born and raised in Britain, have featured in almost every large-scale counter-terrorism investigation carried out by the security agencies. The anti-terrorism laws enacted after the 1999 Good Friday Agreement are therefore unsuited to present conditions, since they define terrorism too broadly as the threat or actual use of an action 'designed to influence the government ... for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause'.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, UK citizens could no longer help to facilitate regime change either at home or overseas without risking prosecution. This was underlined when the events of the Arab Spring in 2010–2011 sparked off political protests in Syria.<sup>20</sup> Despite the observable

<sup>17</sup> Sadik J. Al-Azm, 'Islamic fundamentalism reconsidered: a critique outline of problems, ideas and approaches', *South Asia Bulletin* 13: 1–2, 1993, p. 96.

<sup>18</sup> Of all 150 individuals convicted of terrorism offences in Britain between 2003 and 2013, only those convicted of conspiracy to murder or conspiracy to cause explosions are considered here to be guilty of acts designed to kill or seriously injure British citizens.

<sup>19</sup> Terrorism Act 2000, Part 1, sec. 1, (1)(b) and (c).

<sup>20</sup> Shiv Malik, 'Britons arrested at Heathrow suspected of supporting terrorism in Syria', *Guardian* online, 10

desire of British Foreign Secretary William Hague to see the regime of President Assad overthrown, British Muslims nevertheless risk prosecution for participating in the Syrian civil war. Moreover, following the London bombings of July 2005, the government introduced additional anti-terrorism legislation which conflated individuals who may simply have downloaded extremist material with those plotting to kill fellow citizens.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, we need to distinguish the four key tasks carried out by fundamentalists, all of which might lead them to fall foul of anti-terrorism legislation.

### *Preaching*

This task is exclusively undertaken by men, typically aged over 30, owing to the level of religious education and experience necessary to hold an audience. These preachers, most of whom are based in London, seek to legitimize the core principle of jihad within the minds of impressionable young Muslims. They call simultaneously for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate governed according to shari'a law and an end to western interference in Muslim countries. Although the argument that Muslims hold the right to self-defence is widely held, most fundamentalist preachers do not hold an extremist standpoint; specifically, they do not encourage acts of terrorism either in the UK or overseas. Most fundamentalist preachers recognize that targeting civilians runs contrary to the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. However, throughout the 1990s, the British government also tolerated notorious figures like Abu Qatada, Abu Hamza al-Masri and Omar Bakri Mohammed.<sup>22</sup> Observers allege that in exchange for 'no blood on British soil' the British government gifted these men a safe haven from which to incite jihad overseas—in particular in Algeria.<sup>23</sup> A sea change was signalled when Judge Sir Michael Astil told six convicted terrorists in 2003: 'The spiral of contamination does not begin with you, it has its origins in the teachers and preachers of hatred and revenge who radicalize idealist and impressionable young minds.'<sup>24</sup> Shortly thereafter UK policy appears to have shifted. Consecutive home secretaries have gone to great lengths to deport outspoken preachers not holding British citizenship.<sup>25</sup>

### *Fundraising*

Insurgent groups fighting in Kashmir, Chechnya, Afghanistan and, more recently, Syria rely heavily on western support in terms of both finance and equipment.

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Oct. 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2012/oct/10/britons-arrested-heathrow-suspicion-syria>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>21</sup> *Fifth report of the independent reviewer pursuant to section 14 (3) of the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005, presented to Parliament pursuant to section 14 (6) of the Prevention of Terrorism Act 2005* (London: Home Office, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Frank Foley, 'Reforming counterterrorism: institutions and organizational routines in Britain and France', *Security Studies* 18: 3, 2009, pp. 435–78.

<sup>23</sup> Frank Foley, *Countering terrorism in Britain and France: institutions, norms and the shadow of the past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Khyam (Omar Khyam) et al.* [2007] EWCA Crim 1612.

<sup>25</sup> 'Abu Qatada case has cost UK £1.7m, home secretary says', BBC News, 14 June 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22909465>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

British fundraisers have made critical contributions in this respect, not only by soliciting donations from the Muslim community but also by committing credit card theft and trade fraud. Throughout the 1990s, mosques in the Muslim communities of Birmingham, east London and Bradford organized collections for foreign *mujahideen*.<sup>26</sup> Until a clampdown by the British government in 2000, significant amounts of finance and equipment from the UK were finding their way to *mujahideen* fighters in almost every Islamic insurgency around the globe. Substantial attempts to stop this activity resulted in a number of individuals and charities in the UK having their bank accounts seized.<sup>27</sup> Despite extensive campaigns to halt British support for Islamic insurgencies, the practice continues unabated. Primarily this is because even moderate Muslims recognize the duty of every adherent to Islam to give financial support to those undertaking legitimate jihad. There are clear parallels between British Islamic fundamentalists undertaking fundraising for this end and the Irish American diaspora known to have raised funds for the Provisional IRA during the 'Troubles'.<sup>28</sup>

### *Combative jihad*

Young men with a strong religious background are often convinced that combative jihad is the duty of every capable Muslim. While the term jihad means simply to strive in the way of God, combative jihad distinctly refers to the use of armed force to defend co-religionists from oppression, as well spread Islam universally. To the devout, jihad is a coming of age 'pilgrimage', a rite of passage, something to do before starting a family. For others, simple romanticism and an opportunity to fire AK-47s with friends provide more than sufficient incentive.<sup>29</sup> Clark McCauley's concept of male bonding as a powerful motivation for jihad commands a broad consensus. He argues that the pull of comradeship can be as strong as politics in directing individuals towards underground groups.<sup>30</sup> Those who pursue jihad are not necessarily extremists; indeed, many disagree with the acts of terrorism committed by Al-Qaeda. Jihadists often cite the freedom fighter dichotomy and reject any suggestion that they pose a threat to western security. According to UK security agencies, as of 2008 more than 4,000 British Muslims from the UK's Kashmiri communities had passed through Pakistani training camps before going on to fight Indian forces in Kashmir and NATO forces in Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup> Despite this high number of trainees, only a small percentage actually make it to the front line, while

<sup>26</sup> Author's interview with a counterterrorism officer at SO 15, New Scotland Yard, 28 Aug. 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Freedom of information request made to the Charity Commission by the author, June 2013.

<sup>28</sup> For an illuminating article on this subject which draws parallels between the two causes, see Scott Shane, 'For lawmaker examining terror, a pro-I.R.A. past', *New York Times*, 8 March 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/09/us/politics/09king.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/09/us/politics/09king.html?_r=0), accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Ali et al. (Wahid Ali)* [2009], 223.

<sup>30</sup> Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, 'Mechanisms of political radicalisation: pathways toward terrorism', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20: 3, 2008, pp. 415–33.

<sup>31</sup> Kim Sengupta, 'British Muslims have become a mainstay of the global jihad', *Independent* online, 29 Nov. 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/british-muslims-have-become-a-mainstay-of-the-global-jihad-1040232.html>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

most simply return home and resume normal life.<sup>32</sup> Although only a minority of jihadists have committed acts of terrorism, it is also true that most of those who have been involved in acts of terrorism have previously performed jihad overseas.

### *Facilitation and networking*

The task of facilitation can involve a variety of activities. These range from organizing training for jihad to disseminating fundamentalist literature designed to encourage Muslims to attend lectures given by a specific preacher. Members of the fundamentalist movement who undertake the task of facilitation often need to maintain connections with members of various overseas insurgent groups. Consequently, this task is commonly the domain of retired *mujahideen* with previous experience of fighting in either Afghanistan or Bosnia. Many facilitators travel extensively between the UK and various conflict regions. Pakistani-born but British-raised Rashid Rauf was a notorious facilitator who maintained links between fundamentalists around the world, including members of Al-Qaeda and Kashmir insurgents. Using these connections, Rauf arranged for several British jihadists to gain an audience with an explosives trainer known as Abu Ubaida al-Masri. When these young jihadists adopted a more extremist standpoint and agreed to undertake acts of terrorism in the UK, Rauf continued to facilitate the group as their plots progressed towards execution. It is widely alleged that the men responsible for the London 7/7 bombings received support from the Luton-based Islamic fundamentalist Mohammed Quyyam Khan. Court transcripts indicate that in the course of his activities as facilitator Khan sent the London bombers Mohammed Sidique Khan and Tanvir Hussain to meet a contact in Pakistan in the summer of 2003.

## **British Islamic extremist terrorism**

All the tasks described above, carried out by organized fundamentalist British Muslims, helped to construct and sustain an environment conducive to terrorism. In the course of performing these tasks, a minority of individuals adopt an extremist position leading to acts of terrorism in the UK. For example, members of the 2003 fertilizer plot are known to have raised finance for insurgents in Afghanistan, while the leader of the 2011 Pitsford conspiracy, Irfan Nasser, helped send fellow Muslims to pursue jihad in Pakistan. In the case of the London 7/7 bombings, the Jamaican preacher Abdullah al-Faisal convinced the perpetrators that supporting jihad was the responsibility of every capable Muslim. Consequently, all four were actively engaged in the task of fundraising for the Taliban and at least two undertook combative jihad. Through their engagement in the fundamentalist movement and the various tasks that fall to individual members, the London bombers eventually met the Al-Qaeda facilitator Rashid Rauf. Thereafter, the young jihadists agreed to return to the UK and undertake the 7/7 attacks.

<sup>32</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Ali et al. (Wahid Ali)* [2009], 223.

**Table: Eight major UK terrorist plots, 2003–2011, in which unsuccessful perpetrators were convicted of conspiracy to murder and/or cause explosions**

<i>Discovered</i>	<i>Police code name</i>	<i>Main cell members</i>	<i>Alleged Al-Qaeda associates</i>
2003	Operation Crevice (fertilizer plot)	Omar Khyam, Salahuddin Amin	Mohammed Quyyam Khan (Q), Abdul Hadi al-Iraqi
2005	Operation Theseus (London 7/7)	Mohammed Sidique Khan, Shehzad Tanweer	Mohammed Quyyam Khan (Q), Rashid Rauf, Abu Ubaida al-Masri
2005	Operation Vivace (London 21/7)	Muktar Ibrahim, Yassin Omar	Mohammed al-Ghabra, Rashid Rauf, Abu Ubaida al-Masri
2006	Operation Overt (liquid bombs)	Ahmed Ali Khan, Assad Sarwar, Arafat Khan	Mohammed al-Ghabra, Rashid Rauf, Abu Ubaida al-Masri
2007	Operation Gamble (kidnap soldier)	Pervaiz Khan	No court-tested evidence of any Al-Qaeda involvement
2007	Operation Seagram (Glasgow Airport)	Kafeel Ahmed, Bilal Abdullah	No court-tested evidence of any Al-Qaeda involvement
2008	No police code name (Exeter restaurant bombing)	Nicky Reilly	No court-tested evidence of any Al-Qaeda involvement
2011	Operation Pitsford (Birmingham suicide plot)	Irfan Nasser, Irfan Khalid, Ashik Ali	No court-tested evidence of any Al-Qaeda involvement

Since late 2013, the British government has consistently expressed deep concerns over fundamentalist Muslims travelling from the UK to Syria in pursuit of jihad, warning that they risk prosecution and lengthy prison sentences on their return.<sup>33</sup> In October 2014 counterterrorism police arrested four men over a suspected plot targeting Britain. One of the men detained is alleged to have links to IS.<sup>34</sup>

Overall, since 2003, only around 50 individuals have crossed the line between involvement in the fundamentalist movement and the extremist standpoint from which terrorist plots are pursued with the specific aim of killing British citizens. In this respect, we differentiate between regular fundamentalists convicted of diverse terrorist offences and those who have adopted an extremist standpoint leading to violence against non-combatants. For example, fundraising for a proscribed group

<sup>33</sup> Belinda Goldsmith, 'Britain plans tougher laws to tackle UK jihadists', Reuters, 23 Aug. 2014, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/08/23/uk-britain-security-islamists-idUKKBN0GNoCo20140823>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Ewen MacAskill, Vikram Dodd and Josh Halliday, 'Met police arrest man over suspected terror plot linked to Isis', *Daily Mail Online*, 8 Oct. 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/oct/07/anti-terror-police-arrest-four-men-london-raids>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.



is technically an offence contrary to the Terrorism Act 2000, but it is not itself an extremist or violent activity.

Recognizing the importance of the fundamentalist movement in incubating terrorists, British policy-makers have gone on the offensive. Since 2006, anti-terrorism legislation has led to the deportation of preachers, the freezing of bank accounts linked to fundraisers, the conviction of jihadists and the disruption through curfews of those identified as facilitators. By dismantling the overall movement, politicians believe they can disrupt the process that since 2003 has produced at least eight major terrorist conspiracies in the UK. The table on the preceding page summarizes the key details of each of these plots, including the nucleus of perpetrators, the 'cell'. These terrorist cells are formed among close friends and rarely include strangers. Within each cell, there is usually a leader who is admired for his extreme views.<sup>35</sup>

A functional analysis of five of these eight plots highlights the declining role of Al-Qaeda and Pakistan in respect of the radicalization, training, finance and operational direction of British Islamic extremist terrorism.

## **The declining significance of Al-Qaeda and Pakistan**

Between 2003 and 2006, Al-Qaeda handlers in Pakistan provided extensive support and operational direction to British Islamic extremist terrorists. Since 2007, however, Islamic terrorism in the UK has proceeded in the absence of any such assistance. In a remarkable shift, conspirators have recruited locally—or, indeed, have acted alone. They have also radicalized internally, limited connections with other cells nationally and, for the most part, avoided any activity that might attract the attention of the intelligence and security services. As we shall see, British Islamic extremist terrorism now consists of young Muslims doing 'what they can, when they can'—an ideology first espoused by the Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Mohammed al-Zawahiri over ten years ago. In May 2013, this new approach reached its apogee when a British-born fundamentalist with no training or experience of jihad carried out the brutal murder of soldier Lee Rigby on the streets of south-east London.

### *Radicalization*

In all five plots, we can identify at least one individual responsible for the task of preaching to and thus radicalizing conspirators. The most notable such figures are Abu Qatada, Omar Bakri Mohammed, Abu Hamza al-Masri, Mohammed Hamid and Abdullah al-Faisal.<sup>36</sup> Convicted terrorists commonly cite sermons delivered by at least one of these five men as important in drawing them into the fundamentalist movement. Although such preachers recklessly extol the virtues of fighting and dying for the sake of Allah, narratives consistent with Al-Qaeda's

<sup>35</sup> McCauley and Moskalenko, 'Mechanisms of political radicalisation'.

<sup>36</sup> Foley, 'Reforming counterterrorism'.

core ideology, there is no available evidence to suggest they operate directly at the behest of the organization. The only exception is Operation Crevise. Here, Mohammed Al-Ghabra radicalized the conspirators and arranged for them to go to Pakistan to meet representatives of Al-Qaeda. The United Nations Security Council named Al-Ghabra as an individual linked to both Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban.<sup>37</sup> MI5 echoes this claim, suggesting that al-Ghabra is one of the organization's most senior operatives currently resident in the UK and responsible for sending British Muslims to Pakistan.<sup>38</sup>

Islamic fundamentalist literature, which serves partly to radicalize but mostly to reinforce pre-existing views, remains a constant and significant factor. When police searched the homes of men involved in all five plots, they recovered copies of the *Al-Qaeda manual*, *Milestones*, *Constants on the path of jihad*, *Join the caravan*, *The book of jihad* and *The army of Madinah in Kashmir*. Since 2010, these traditional publications have been supplemented with a monthly publication entitled *Inspire*.<sup>39</sup> Produced by Al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP), this glossy, multimedia magazine, released online, includes interviews with front-line *mujahideen* fighters in Afghanistan and practical assistance on explosives and weapons-making.<sup>40</sup> The very title of the publication implies that today Al-Qaeda recognizes that its brand is more powerful as a force multiplier than in respect of its organizational capabilities.

Operation Vivace, the failed attempt to bomb London on 21 July 2005, offers clear insight into the role of mosques in radicalization. In this plot, six African immigrants attempted to carry out a suicide mission against the London transport network.<sup>41</sup> Similarities between this plot and its predecessors are not coincidental; the leaders of both Theseus and Vivace received explosives training from the same Al-Qaeda operative in Pakistan, Abu Ubaida al-Masri. In addition, both conspiracies received varying levels of operational direction from a second Al-Qaeda operative, Rashid Rauf. Owing to chemical degradation, none of the four improvised explosive devices detonated successfully.<sup>42</sup> Shortly after the failed suicide mission, all the would-be bombers were arrested and eventually stood trial. We know a great deal about the cell's activities from a 12,000-page archive of court transcripts.<sup>43</sup>

Muktar Ibrahim regularly attended lectures delivered by Abu Hamza al-Masri at Finsbury Park Mosque.<sup>44</sup> According to prosecution witnesses, Ibrahim and

<sup>37</sup> David Williams, 'Behind all terror attacks against Britain: Bin Laden's holy warrior', 8 Sept. 2009, *Daily Mail Online*, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1211827/Behind-terror-attacks-Britain-Bin-Ladens-Holy-Warrior.html>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>38</sup> *Her Majesty's Treasury (Respondent) v. Mohammed Jabar Ahmed and others* [2010], UKSC 2, [https://www.supreme-court.uk/decided-cases/docs/UKSC\\_2009\\_0015\\_PressSummary.pdf](https://www.supreme-court.uk/decided-cases/docs/UKSC_2009_0015_PressSummary.pdf), accessed 12 Nov. 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Public Intelligence, 'Archive for *Inspire* magazine', <http://publicintelligence.net/tag/inspire-magazine/>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>40</sup> *Inspire* magazine, no. 6, Summer 2011, pp. 40–45, provided detailed, photographed instructions on how to derive Acetone Peroxide (AP) from household ingredients.

<sup>41</sup> James Sturcke, 'July 21st suspect appears in court', *Guardian* online, 23 Dec. 2005, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2005/dec/23/july7.uksecurity1>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>42</sup> '21/7 London bombers, whose explosives failed, launch appeal for crime they say was hoax', *Huffington Post*, 19 Sept. 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/09/19/217-london-bombers-whose-\\_n\\_1897828.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2012/09/19/217-london-bombers-whose-_n_1897828.html), accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Ibrahim et al. (Muktar Ibrahim)* [2007] EWCA Crim 2396, 2319, 2321.

<sup>44</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Ibrahim et al. (Muktar Ibrahim)* [2007], 231.

Yassin Omar regularly listened to Al-Masri and possessed tapes of sermons by Abdullah el-Faisal—the preacher alleged to have influenced members of Operation Theseus.<sup>45</sup> Both men held fundamentalist views and would often discuss jihad in Iraq, Afghanistan and Chechnya.<sup>46</sup> An extensive search by the police of the conspirators' homes revealed a significant cache of jihadist material. Files uncovered include home-made films featuring images of beheadings and other terrorist atrocities. Prosecutors argue that the material demonstrates that the defendants supported the vision of Al-Qaeda, sought the creation of a Muslim state and were sympathetic towards acts of terrorism.<sup>47</sup>

Allegedly, through Finsbury Park Mosque, where the men prayed and socialized, the cell gained the support of Mohammed al-Ghabra. The security services believe Al-Ghabra arranged for Ibrahim and two other companions, namely Rizwan Majid and Shaheel Ismail, to travel to Pakistan for jihad training.<sup>48</sup> Between them, they carried over £5,000 in cash, sleeping bags, cold-weather outer clothing, and first-aid manuals covering how to treat ballistic injuries.<sup>49</sup> Less than three months later, in March 2005, Muktar Ibrahim returned to the UK and almost immediately began the process of acquiring large quantities of hydrogen peroxide.<sup>50</sup> What is particularly noteworthy about the date Ibrahim left for Pakistan, his sudden decision to return and the date he arrived back is that they match almost exactly the sequence of events and the schedule pursued by Theseus leader Mohammed Sidique Khan.

Since 2005, direct radicalization by preachers has declined in favour of indirect radicalization through social media. Meanwhile, the use of traditional safe havens for radicalization has also diminished, partly as a result of the government campaign against fundamentalism, which began shortly after the London 7/7 bombings. Since then, online discussion forums and social media sites including YouTube, Facebook and Twitter have replaced mosques, community centres and university prayer rooms as the preferred routes for fundamentalist communication. Today, politically minded young Muslims find it safer to meet up at each other's homes and watch videos of attacks on coalition forces in Afghanistan than to publicly heckle the local imam for condemning acts of terrorism—activities that may draw the attention of those working in the Prevent programme.<sup>51</sup> Fundamentalist material that once found its way into the hands of young jihadists through bookshops, gyms and mosques is today downloaded from the internet.<sup>52</sup>

The dominance of social media websites and private discussion forums in this context is vividly illustrated by the immediate aftermath of the killing in 2013 of

<sup>45</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Ibrahim et al. (Muktar Ibrahim)* [2007], 233.

<sup>46</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Ibrahim et al. (Muktar Ibrahim)* [2007], 233.

<sup>47</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Ibrahim et al. (Muktar Ibrahim)* [2007], 237.

<sup>48</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Ibrahim et al. (Muktar Ibrahim)* [2007], 210.

<sup>49</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Ibrahim et al. (Muktar Ibrahim)* [2007], 235.

<sup>50</sup> 'Bomb jury told of peroxide buying', BBC News, 19 Jan. 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6274299.stm>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Prevent is one of the four elements of CONTEST, the government's counterterrorism strategy. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/protecting-the-uk-against-terrorism/supporting-pages/prevent>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Timothy Thomas, 'Countering internet extremism' (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Foreign Military Studies Office (Army), 2009).

soldier Lee Rigby. Still in possession of the murder weapon, his hands covered in blood, Michael Adebolajo, born British and raised in east London, encouraged observers to film him as he sought to rationalize what he had just done. There can be little doubt that Adebolajo expected the footage to be widely distributed online with the potential to incite others to similar acts. This incident in particular underlines Sageman's contention that radicalization now takes place far from the tribal regions of Pakistan.<sup>53</sup> While Al-Qaeda continues to decline, YouTube videos showcasing figures like Adebolajo will continue to play a significant role in radicalizing the next generation of terrorists.

### *Training and finance*

Without exception, Pakistan served as the main training ground for those who engaged in Islamic extremist terrorism in Britain between 2003 and 2006. In four of the five plots examined here, two individuals external to the cell organized and partly financed the training. The first and perhaps the most high-profile individual alleged to have performed the tasks of fundraising and facilitating is Luton-based Mohammed Quyyam Khan, also known as Q. Both the Crevice conspirators and the now deceased Theseus suicide bombers received direct assistance from Q in obtaining training in Pakistan. A second man, Mohammed al-Ghabra, organized trips to Pakistan for the cell members of both Vivace and Overt. In all four plots, evidence suggests the conspirators received explosives training from Al-Qaeda specialists, namely Abdul Hadi al-Iraqi and Abu Ubaida al-Masri.

Operation Crevice—the notorious 'fertilizer plot' exposed in 2003—clearly illustrates Pakistan's role in training and finance before 2006. British-born and raised Omar Khyam is widely believed to have led the conspirators, whose targets included nightclubs, shopping centres and domestic utility installations.<sup>54</sup> Aged 18, Khyam travelled to Kashmir and fought with Pakistani-backed Islamist groups against Indian forces.<sup>55</sup> Before returning to London in 2001 he spent time in Afghanistan, obtaining an audience with Taliban commander Abdul Hadi al-Iraqi.<sup>56</sup> Following this meeting, Khyam agreed to undertake fundraising in order to supply finance and equipment to Hadi. By 2003, Khyam and his friends were sending up to £4,000 a month to Afghanistan.<sup>57</sup>

Khyam and at least four other associates were already attending events facilitated by the now banned Islamic fundamentalist group Al-Muhajiroun (ALM).<sup>58</sup> The Finsbury Park Mosque appears significant in this respect. In addition to hearing speeches from resident preacher Abu Hamza al-Masri, the men also watched videotapes depicting war crimes carried out by Indian forces against men,

<sup>53</sup> Sageman, *Leaderless jihad*.

<sup>54</sup> Gordon Corera, 'Analysis: MI5 and the bomber', BBC News, 30 April 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6477777.stm>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Khyam (Omar Khyam) et al.* [2007], 1885.

<sup>56</sup> Silber, *The Al Qaeda factor*, p. 106.

<sup>57</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Khyam (Omar Khyam) et al.* [2007], 5769.

<sup>58</sup> 'Profile Omar Khyam', BBC News, 30 April 2007, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/6149794.stm>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

women and children in Kashmir.<sup>59</sup> After the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, attitudes hardened. According to Khyam, 'when people mentioned things like the UK or the Americans need to be attacked, there would be no defending the UK any more'.<sup>60</sup> Consequently, members of the Crevice cell quickly became determined to fight British forces in Afghanistan, seeking out permission from Taliban commander Abdul Hadi Al-Iraqi in order to do so.<sup>61</sup>

To this end, Khyam asked an associate to negotiate with a tribal elder in north-west Pakistan to establish a military training camp.<sup>62</sup> Using finance provided by the cell, the elder and his son organized weapons, food, tents and ammunition.<sup>63</sup> The camp began in the first week of July 2003, and lasted roughly four to six weeks.<sup>64</sup> Approximately two weeks earlier, Khyam and his fellow cell member Salahuddin Amin undertook explosives training using ammonium nitrate and urea at a camp in Kohat, Pakistan.<sup>65</sup> Al-Qaeda and the Taliban operated 157 training camps in the tribal area around Kohat.<sup>66</sup> In court, Khyam admitted that Mohammed Quyyam Khan (Q) funded the trip to Pakistan.<sup>67</sup> At a meeting between the two men before he left, Q expressed concerns about the UK authorities investigating his activities. Consequently, he told Khyam, 'it's better for both of us if we don't meet each other, because the security services may be monitoring me.'<sup>68</sup>

By contrast, Operation Pitsford in 2011 illustrates a shifting trend. Three conspirators who were focused on suicide bombing received only basic military training delivered by insurgent groups in Kashmir. At no point in the course of the trial did prosecutors offer any evidence to suggest that Al-Qaeda operatives in either the UK or Pakistan arranged for the conspirators to undergo any kind of specialist training. Furthermore, none of the six men convicted in relation to a further plot to bomb an English Defence League (EDL) rally in the summer of 2012 received any training or direction from handlers in Pakistan. This also appears to be the case in relation to the two men responsible for killing Lee Rigby in May 2013. And all four men convicted in March 2013 of preparing for an act of terrorism were self-trained in the Brecon Beacons and relied heavily on explosives instructions downloaded from the internet.<sup>69</sup>

There have also been discernible shifts in terrorist finance. Previously, terrorists have made extensive use of credit card fraud to finance operations in the UK. Between February and March 2004, the leader of Crevice, Omar Khyam, and the

<sup>59</sup> Silber, *The Al Qaeda factor*, pp. 85–9.

<sup>60</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Khyam (Omar Khyam) et al.* [2007], 1933.

<sup>61</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Khyam (Omar Khyam) et al.* [2007], 54.

<sup>62</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Khyam (Omar Khyam) et al.* [2007], 139.

<sup>63</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Khyam (Omar Khyam) et al.* [2007], 5822.

<sup>64</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Khyam (Omar Khyam) et al.* [2007], 5833.

<sup>65</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Khyam (Omar Khyam) et al.* [2007], 5833.

<sup>66</sup> Bill Roggio, 'Times Square bombing suspect trained in Pakistan's North Waziristan', *Long War Journal*, 4 May 2010, [http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/05/times\\_square\\_bombing.php](http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/05/times_square_bombing.php), accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>67</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Khyam (Omar Khyam) et al.* [2007], 1985.

<sup>68</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Khyam (Omar Khyam) et al.* [2007], 1986.

<sup>69</sup> Arthur Martin, 'Home-grown terrorists who plotted to blow up Territorial Army base with bomb mounted on a remote control car jailed for 44 years', *Daily Mail Online*, 18 April 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2311024/Luton-terrorists-plotted-blow-TA-base-toy-car-bomb-sentenced-44-years.html>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

leader of Theseus, Mohammed Sidique Khan, met on four separate occasions.<sup>70</sup> According to UK counterterrorist police, the only subjects discussed were how to defraud banks and building societies. Evidence from court transcripts suggests they did this for three reasons: initially to supply insurgents in Afghanistan, then to finance military training in Pakistan, and later on to fund terrorism in the UK.<sup>71</sup> Since 2006, conspirators appear to have relied more on the misuse of charitable donations in the hope of evading increased financial surveillance. In December 2006 the US Treasury froze Mohammed al-Ghabra's bank accounts, accusing him of financing Kashmiri insurgent groups and the training of British jihadists. Two years later, the UK Charity Commission banned him from running any charitable organization.<sup>72</sup> More recently, in 2011 men involved in the Pitsford conspiracy used over £10,000 raised for various relief agencies to fund their terrorist ambitions.

### *Operational direction*

The four plots that occurred between 2003 and 2006 constitute a unique networked cluster directed by three men with proven links to Al-Qaeda. Established operatives Abdul Hadi al-Iraqi, Rashid Rauf and Abu Ubaida al-Masri served as the main interface between Pakistan and the UK ringleaders of Crevice, Theseus, Vivace and Overt. Court transcripts and expert witnesses indicate that these three Al-Qaeda associates actively directed terrorism in the UK up to 2006. Since 2007, however, there has been a notable absence of Pakistani-based Al-Qaeda handlers directing UK terrorism. While acknowledging the potential opportunities provided by ongoing conflicts in Libya, Syria and Somalia for the re-emergence of terrorism in the UK directed by Al-Qaeda, evidence for Hoffman's proposition that Al-Qaeda remains an *organizational* threat is notably absent.

The four 2003–2006 plots show clear operational direction. In 2003, when members of Crevice asked to participate in combative jihad in Afghanistan, Abdul Hadi al-Iraqi refused permission, telling them that if they really wanted to do something, they should do it back in the UK. Activities consistent with preparing for an act of terrorism began immediately after the men arrived home. The question is to what extent the cell retained some kind of operational direction from Hadi. It appears that Mohammed Quyyam Khan (the facilitator who financed the cell's training in Pakistan and is alleged to have been an Al-Qaeda operative) took over direction of the conspirators after they returned from Pakistan. We know that MI5 discovered the conspiracy relatively quickly in early 2004, most probably because they had Quyyam Khan under extensive surveillance. Consequently, they constituted an authorized Al-Qaeda cell receiving operational direction right up until their arrest.

The leaders of Theseus, Vivace and Overt also received direction though Al-Qaeda associates. Overwhelming evidence suggests that operatives Rashid

<sup>70</sup> 'Pressure grows for 7/7 inquiry', BBC News, 1 May 2007, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/6610209.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6610209.stm), accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>71</sup> Court transcript, *R. v. Khyam (Omar Khyam) et al.* [2007], 2145.

<sup>72</sup> Freedom of information request made by the author to the Charity Commission, Oct. 2013.

Rauf and Abu Ubaida al-Masri directed the three conspiracies from Pakistan via phone and email. Between 2003 and 2006, Al-Masri recruited cell leaders Mohammed Sidique Khan, Muktar Ibrahim, and Ahmed Ali Khan to carry out suicide terrorism in the UK. Upon returning to the UK, the cells quickly shifted into the operational cycle. Meanwhile, pursued by the CIA and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Al-Masri died from natural causes in December 2007. US drones assassinated Rauf at a compound in North Waziristan in November 2008.<sup>73</sup> Thereafter, kinetic operations using both drones and special forces have continued to erode the hard core of Al-Qaeda as an organization.

As a result, in the years following the last of these four operations in 2006, the role of Al-Qaeda handlers in Pakistan significantly declined. The evidence suggests that, despite receiving passive assistance from Kashmiri insurgents to obtain basic military training, the Pitsford conspirators acted alone in their pursuit of terrorism. The new era of independent activity arguably began in 2007 with the attempt to kidnap a British soldier and a suicide attack on Glasgow Airport in which the perpetrators received no assistance from Al-Qaeda. The same pattern can be observed in respect of the six men convicted of plotting to blow up an EDL rally in 2012, the four men found guilty in March 2013 of planning an act of terrorism against a reserve army barracks, and the two men responsible for killing Lee Rigby in May 2013. In all four cases since 2006, there is no substantive evidence of authorization or operational direction from Al-Qaeda handlers in either the UK or Pakistan. This suggests that Pakistan has become largely passive, a place where young British Muslims willing to put up with harsh conditions can train for jihad. Having played a vital role between 2003 and 2006, Al-Qaeda camps teaching chemical and explosives skills are generally no longer accessible because of drone activity.

### *Independent action*

After the failure of Operation Overt, several terrorist plots occurred without any influence from either Pakistan or Al-Qaeda. In January 2007, police arrested Birmingham-based Pervaiz Khan on suspicion of plotting to kidnap and behead a serving British soldier. As in the case of Michael Adebajo six years later, there is no suggestion that Khan established any relationship with Al-Qaeda, either in the UK or overseas.<sup>74</sup> Months later, in June 2007, a new and potentially more dangerous plot emerged, code-named Operation Seagram. Acting under their own auspices, medical doctor Bilal Abdullah and PhD student Kafeel Ahmed parked two explosives-laden cars in central London. Fortunately, the mobile phone detonators failed. In a last-ditch attempt at martyrdom, the two men drove a jeep, again packed with explosives, into the main entrance of Glasgow International Airport. Dr Abdullah miraculously survived the suicide mission,

<sup>73</sup> Andrew Alderson, 'British terror mastermind Rashid Rauf "killed in US missile strike"', *Telegraph* online, 22 Nov. 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/3500341/British-terror-mastermind-Rashid-Rauf-killed-in-US-missile-strike.html>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>74</sup> Author interview with a retired member of Special Branch who led the Birmingham team involved in Operation Gamble, June 2011.

and in court pointed to western aggression against Iraq as his primary motivation. Mr Justice MacKay labelled Abdullah a religious extremist and a bigot before sentencing him to a minimum of 32 years in prison.<sup>75</sup> The following year, in May 2008, Muslim convert Nicky Reilly failed in a viable attempt to carry out a suicide mission in Exeter. Continuing the trend in which British Muslims have since 2007 pursued extremist terrorism without support or direction from Al-Qaeda overseas, Reilly appears to have radicalized himself and learned how to construct explosives through material available on the internet.<sup>76</sup>

For two years after the official end to the British military mission in Iraq in 2009 there was a lull in major Islamic extremist terrorist conspiracies in Britain. However, in September 2011 police arrested three men seeking to repeat the London bombings of July 2005.<sup>77</sup> Unlike the cells working on Operations Theseus and Vivace, however, these men lacked support from established Al-Qaeda operatives in either the UK or Pakistan. By contrast with Crevice, the Pitsford cell employed no obvious counter-surveillance techniques, as is evident from the ease with which the security services monitored their activities both inside the bomb factory and across various public spaces. Despite the absence of Pakistani-based Al-Qaeda handlers, police observed Irfan Khalid, Irfan Nasser and Ashik Ali experimenting with various explosive ingredients before their arrest.<sup>78</sup> Although the two cell leaders, Khalid and Nasser, received basic military training from Kashmiri insurgents, back in the UK they acted with complete autonomy. In conjunction with minor terrorist incidents from 2007 onwards, Pitsford offers evidence to support the proposition that today British Muslims receive no authorization or operational direction from Al-Qaeda in Pakistan.

Before the trial commenced in October 2012, prosecutors issued a 300-page summary outlining the main elements of the conspiracy. Transcripts reveal what the men were thinking in terms of politics, religion and, ultimately, the acts of terrorism they intended to carry out. Queen's Counsel (QC) Brian Altman told the court that Irfan Nasser and a defendant in a separate trial, Rahin Ahmed, were instrumental in sending four young local men to Pakistan for terrorist training.<sup>79</sup> Judge Henriques identified Irfan Nasser as the main driving force behind the plot, describing him as a skilful bomb-maker and the radicalizer of a determined team of individuals.<sup>80</sup> Forensic examination of computers used by the Pitsford conspirators revealed a comprehensive collection of material published by American-born Islamic fundamentalist Anwar al-Awlaki.<sup>81</sup> The internet, in particular YouTube,

<sup>75</sup> 'Bomb plot doctor jailed for life', BBC News, 17 Dec. 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7786884.stm>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>76</sup> 'Blast suspect was radicalised', BBC News, 23 May 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/devon/7415831.stm>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>77</sup> Opening note, *R. v. Nasser et al. (Irfan Nasser)* [2012] EWCA Crim. 2.

<sup>78</sup> Opening note, *R. v. Nasser et al. (Irfan Nasser)* [2012]; 4; author's interview with retired member of Special Branch.

<sup>79</sup> Author's notes from attendance at the trial of *R. v. Nasser et al.*; author's interview with retired member of Special Branch.

<sup>80</sup> Dominic Casciani, 'Terror plot: jail terms for Birmingham bomb plotters', BBC News, 26 April 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22290927>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>81</sup> Public Intelligence, 'Archive for *Inspire* magazine'.



played a significant role in reinforcing views held by the men who would regularly meet to watch videos of attacks on coalition forces in Afghanistan.

In March 2009, Irfan Khalid and Irfan Nasser travelled to Pakistan in pursuit of combative jihad. Initially the men flew to Islamabad to undertake military training with the Kashmiri insurgent group Harakat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM). Nasser told a fellow conspirator he had learned to fire weapons in a 'Hurcut' (Harakat-ul-Mujahideen) camp inside Pakistan.<sup>82</sup> MI5 secretly recorded Nasser telling a fellow conspirator: 'You get the best training there [Pakistan] because the government doesn't attack them, because those mujahideen say we're not going to attack Pakistani government and they say ok you can send people Kashmir and Afghanistan but don't do nothing here.'<sup>83</sup> After graduating from basic military training in 2009, the two Irfans then undertook a second trip to Pakistan a year later, on 26 December 2010.<sup>84</sup> Better networked and more capable than when they first arrived, the men claimed to have travelled to Waziristan (in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan). This troubled mountainous region continues to be a stronghold for Al-Qaeda and Taliban militants. In June 2013, a US drone strike killed seven people in the village of Shokhei.<sup>85</sup> Discussing the visit with associate Mohammed Rizwan, the two Irfans said that there were no more training camps in Waziristan—ostensibly because of US drone activity. Instead, recruits had to receive explosives training inside houses.<sup>86</sup> Crown prosecutors believe the training they received in December 2010 enabled the defendants to experiment in producing an explosive mix—an activity that began within six weeks of their return to the UK in July 2011.<sup>87</sup>

In terms of operational direction, during an interview with police Ashik Ali claimed that Khalid and Nasser's visit to Waziristan in December 2010 had significantly raised the stakes for them.<sup>88</sup> He told officers that during this trip the two men received training on how to use weapons and make certain 'things'. Police listening probes recorded the pair discussing how during their time in Pakistan they had fired rocket-propelled grenades, hidden from drones, created 'martyrdom videos' and met associates of Al-Qaeda.<sup>89</sup> However, officers investigating the case suggested that this was largely bravado, unsubstantiated boasting designed to reinforce the jihadist credentials of the two Irfans among their followers.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Opening note, *R. v. Nasser et al. (Irfan Nasser)* [2012], 239; author's interview with retired member of Special Branch.

<sup>83</sup> Opening note, *R. v. Nasser et al. (Irfan Nasser)* [2012], 239; author's interview with retired member of Special Branch.

<sup>84</sup> Opening note, *R. v. Nasser et al. (Irfan Nasser)* [2012], 25; author's interview with retired member of Special Branch.

<sup>85</sup> 'Pakistani drone kills seven in North Waziristan', BBC News, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-22820208>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>86</sup> Opening note, *R. v. Nasser et al. (Irfan Nasser)* [2012], 240; author's interview with retired member of Special Branch.

<sup>87</sup> Opening note, *R. v. Nasser et al. (Irfan Nasser)* [2012], 8; author's interview with retired member of Special Branch.

<sup>88</sup> Opening note, *R. v. Nasser et al. (Irfan Nasser)* [2012], 294; author's interview with retired member of Special Branch.

<sup>89</sup> Opening note, *R. v. Nasser et al. (Irfan Nasser)* [2012], 17; author's interview with retired member of Special Branch.

<sup>90</sup> Author's discussions with journalists and police while attending the *R. v. Nasser et al. trial*, Jan.–March 2013.

Like their predecessors in Operation Overt, the men involved in Pitsford manipulated the fifth pillar of Islam to fund their operations in both the UK and Pakistan.<sup>91</sup> Aided by three others, core cell members openly solicited charitable donations on the streets of Birmingham during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Prosecutors believe that the group collected as much as £13,500 from unsuspecting members of the Muslim faith. On the direction of cell leader Irfan Nasser, associate Rahin Ahmed traded these funds on the foreign exchange market.<sup>92</sup> Brian Altman QC told members of the jury that the defendants stole charitable donations in order to help fund a ‘dawah’ centre (used to call people to Islam) which they intended to use as a vehicle to spread their fundamentalist beliefs in the hope of inciting others to pursue terrorism.<sup>93</sup>

## Conclusions

The significance of Al-Qaeda and Pakistan in relation to British-based Islamic extremist terrorism has steadily declined since 2007. While there are a number of competing explanations for this trend, operational failure is not one of them. Between 2003 and 2006, Al-Qaeda directed four plots against the UK. The security services were able to intercept only two of these before execution. There is therefore no reason to suggest that from 2007 Al-Qaeda simply gave up on what was for them overall a successful enterprise. Furthermore, given that Islamic extremist terrorism continued in the UK after this point, it is also unlikely that the decline can be explained by reference to counter-radicalization initiatives. However, after Operation Overt in 2006, fewer individuals sought training in Pakistan or support from Al-Qaeda.

It is possible that British fundamentalist Muslims have concluded that to terrorize a population, one does not require money, training or support from overseas. By 2006 there was an abundant awareness that communication of any kind with groups abroad might attract unwelcome attention from the authorities. The murder of Lee Rigby in Woolwich in May 2013 cost almost nothing, required no specialist training and had no apparent direction from overseas.

The strongest explanation for the declining role of Al-Qaeda and Pakistan is the overwhelming success of American drone strikes in North Waziristan—a location implicated in all five case-studies explored above. Between 2003 and 2006, a mere six US drone strikes killed just nine militants. In stark contrast, since 2007 there have been over 350 strikes, eliminating 2,000 active militants in Pakistan. This programme has been expanded to other regions and, together with special operations, appears to have dramatically reduced Al-Qaeda’s reach and capabilities. Messages recovered from the home of Osama bin Laden in 2011 suggest that

<sup>91</sup> Opening note, *R. v. Nasser et al. (Irfan Nasser)* [2012], 296; author’s interview with retired member of Special Branch.

<sup>92</sup> Opening note, *R. v. Nasser et al. (Irfan Nasser)* [2012], 5; author’s interview with retired member of Special Branch.

<sup>93</sup> Opening note, *R. v. Nasser et al. (Irfan Nasser)* [2012], 21; author’s interview with retired member of Special Branch.

the alleged number three in Al-Qaeda, Atiyah Abd al-Rahma, complained that drone-launched missiles were killing Al-Qaeda operatives faster than he could replace them.<sup>94</sup>

In December 2007, Abu Ubaida al-Masri (the man responsible for providing explosives training to leaders of three major UK terrorist plots) died of natural causes. The following year, US drone strikes killed Rashid Rauf in northern Pakistan.<sup>95</sup> In the UK, counterterrorist policy has been less draconian. Men alleged to have helped facilitate terrorist conspiracies between 2003 and 2006 are overtly disrupted (police make it clear they know and are constantly watching them); in extreme cases, these individuals are placed under strict control orders known as T-PIMS. After 2006, the network between the UK and Pakistan providing access to Al-Qaeda specialists effectively collapsed. Put simply, from around 2007 Al-Qaeda was unable to provide links between facilitators in the UK and operatives in Pakistan. Consequently, anyone with ambitions to commit terrorism had no choice but to work on their own.

What might the future hold in terms of Al-Qaeda and Pakistan's involvement in British Islamic extremist terrorism? Al-Qaeda is active at various levels on several new battlefronts. As a direct consequence of the now entrenched fundamentalist movement, British Muslims are flooding into Mali, Somalia and Syria to carry out the task of combative jihad.<sup>96</sup> In particular, since late 2013 those fighting in Syria alongside ISIS have swiftly risen to become the greatest terrorist threat to the UK since Al-Qaeda in 2003. Therefore, British counter-terrorist police have continued to address the role played at home by the fundamentalist movement and self-radicalizers while also watching British Muslims travelling to Syria for fear of a return of overseas direction. Accordingly, their resources are now overstretched.<sup>97</sup> As we have seen, there is no evidence to suggest that Al-Qaeda has consciously made the decision to stop targeting the UK. Given the organization's previous success, one assumes that should they be able to re-establish a network, new plots directed by this organization might occur. If not Al-Qaeda, then potentially now ISIS will inspire and assist fundamentalists to pursue terrorism in the UK. In this respect, we may see a repeat of the 2003–2006 period in which Al-Qaeda recruited the most promising volunteers for jihad, training them abroad before returning them home with orders to carry out suicide terrorism. However, for the time being at least, Al-Qaeda remains an aspiration only for would-be British terrorists, and Sageman's prediction of an era of leaderless jihad pursued by self-starters appears to have come true.

<sup>94</sup> Agence France-Presse, 'Osama bin Laden complained of al Qaeda "disaster"', *International Herald Tribune*, 30 April 2013, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/372284/osama-bin-laden-complained-of-al-qaeda-disaster-disaster/>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>95</sup> Alderson, 'British terror mastermind Rashid Rauf "killed in US missile strike".'

<sup>96</sup> Tom Whitehead, 'Syria a "game changer" for UK terror threat, warns Home Office intelligence chief', *Telegraph* online, 3 July 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/law-and-order/10157825/Syria-a-game-changer-for-UK-terror-threat-warns-Home-Office-intelligence-chief.html>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

<sup>97</sup> Dominic Casciani, 'Terror-related crime "stretches police"—Scotland Yard', BBC News, 17 Oct. 2014, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-29649010>, accessed 11 Nov. 2014.

