

9/11: an intelligence failure and its consequences

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On the tenth anniversary of September 11, Professor Anthony Glees reflects on the intelligence failures and their consequences that led to 9/11.



Within a few minutes of the attacks on the Twin Towers on the morning of 11 September 2001, '9/11' became the defining moment for the new 21st century. To western eyes the chilling film of the airplanes, the skyscrapers and the victims at once became an instantly recognisable icon of terrorist wickedness. To many in the Islamic world, perhaps just initially, 9/11 was greeted with joy as a heroic blow delivered by a few against the mightiest nation on earth and proving that Muslims had finally fought back against the values of America and its support for the hated state of Israel. To the terrorists, however, 9/11 was hard evidence of what they had achieved and could achieve in the future.

Within days, however, the trauma of the first hours was made worse by the understanding that in a real sense 9/11 had not been the bolt from the blue it had initially seemed. People recalled that the World Trade Centre had been a target in 1993, that in 1998 Al Qaeda had instructed Muslims to kill Americans anywhere in the world and that in 2000 the US National Commission on Terrorism tried to get the American government to understand that a further terrorist attack on the United States was a real possibility. Actually, Arab terrorists had been using airplanes as a weapon in their struggle for more than twenty years (though not as guided missiles). The more this was thought about, the clearer it became: 9/11 was the outcome of a catastrophic intelligence failure and not just a devastating security one. It should not have happened and it needed to be prevented.

Reflecting on these twin failures caused two sorts of thing to happen – things which continue to shape our world ten years on. First the US unleashed an overwhelming strike against the Taleban in Afghanistan and then, in 2003, also on Saddam Hussein in Iraq (both regimes being seen as strategic sponsors of what quickly became known as 'international' or 'Islamist' terrorism).

The second major response to 9/11 was the development of a new kind of intelligence-led security policy. As far as Britain has been concerned, 9/11 prompted 'shoulder to shoulder' military activity with the USA but also a fundamental re-think of its domestic security policy. A few days after 9/11 British intelligence chiefs were in Washington offering collaboration and in London Sir David Omand and others began to formulate an entirely new and brilliant strategy to deal with Islamism, which he termed 'Contest'. Its aim was to gather and exploit secret and other intelligence on Islamists in the UK to contain and disrupt them. It is true that this policy was reactive. British domestic and foreign intelligence activity had been wound down after the end of the Cold War and although there had been evidence of Islamist terrorist plots in the UK since 1999-2000, and MI5 had known there were extremist preachers at work in Britain, the view had been that the target of their venom was mostly other Arab states or Israel. The London Bombings of 2005 revealed the grave errors of this assessment, very much on a par with the critical mistakes made by MI6 in its evaluation of Saddam's WMD programme in Iraq.

Reviewing the past decade today, a number of things are clear. Listing them in order of importance, it is fair to believe that our intelligence activity has improved beyond all reasonable expectations. Several major attacks against the UK or inspired from groups and individuals in the UK have been thwarted. There has been no further extensive loss of life although in some cases (that of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, for example) this was the outcome of luck, not good security work. Individual Islamists continued to score hits, however, as the attempted assassination of Stephen Timms MP by a London student illustrated only too clearly. But it is now very hard to believe that a second 9/11 in the UK could take place without our security community getting wind of it. The investment put into security by Blair and Brown paid dividends, without doubt.

On the debit side, however, the view that Britain's peculiar situation in terms of its special closeness to the USA and its policies and the large number of immigrants from Pakistan required at least a period of especially robust security activity and laws led to hefty and often misplaced criticism from some prominent British lawyers, journalists and academics. Rather than seeking to protect democracy from terrorists who wanted not just a different foreign policy but a Britain run by imams, these critics said Britain had become a 'national security state'. They were not wrong about this but their definition of what this meant was certainly off-beam. Our intelligence services, they said, were using blanket surveillance to stamp out all debate, serving the interests of a prime minister (Blair) who had 'lied' over the existence of WMD in Iraq in order to justify a war which should never have been fought. Voices in the media and in academe could be heard prior to 2005, arguing that 'securitization' policies were simply exploiting fear of terrorism for base political purposes and even yielding to 'the power of nightmares' as a BBC TV programme alleged in 2004.

Above all, they accused British intelligence of being complicit in torture by allowing our intelligence officers to participate, at a distance, in the torture of suspects and offering support to regimes, like Libya, Egypt or Saudi Arabia who used torture as a matter of course.

There is no doubt that these allegations (currently being investigated) would, if substantiated, do major and serious damage to Britain's intelligence community and rightly so. The systematic use of torture, or a systemic re-definition of methods of interrogation which the world would regard as torture (such as waterboarding or beating) which are, without question, torture robs western democracy of key parts of its legitimacy in combating groups and individuals who want to use terror against it. Ironically but perhaps inevitably, greater investment in security may have made public opinion more skeptical about the need for ten years of tougher policies. It is easy to reinterpret the past from a safer present in the same way as few before 9/11 feared an Islamist attack on the USA.

Could there be another 9/11? Plainly there could if governments decided to backtrack on security. This isn't likely but it is possible even if at the moment the US is developing preventative measures along the lines set down by Britain and Britain is preparing earnestly for the 2012 Olympics. But surveillance, secret intelligence gathering, electronic interception and CCTV are unpopular particularly to young citizens who think nothing of posting their personal secrets in indelible electronic ink on the internet but object to being 'spied on'.

It is revealing that a recent BBC poll showed that a quarter of all young Britons thought the attacks were carried out by the government of the USA (just as many Muslim voices can still be heard blaming Mossad).

Perhaps an even greater threat is posed by former figures of authority in government publicly disavowing the lines they must have taken privately over the past ten years. A former Director of Public Prosecutions has condemned from a new-found party political perspective counter-terrorism legislation he evidently thought was justified at the time. A former Director of the Security Service, Eliza Manningham-Buller, now claims Britain faced 'no threat from Iraq' prior to invasion and said the war there would increase the threat from domestic terrorism (of course, no one had suggested that Iraq posed a *domestic* threat to Britain and the view that its WMD posed an *international threat* was, of course, the view taken by MI5's sister agency, MI6 and based on intelligence work with which MI5 would have had nothing to do, and on which its opinion counted for very little).

But the net effect of statements like these from people who would deserve to be listened to more carefully if they had resigned at the time is clear. It will become ever more difficult for democratic governments to continue to do the right thing unless, God forbid, there are further terrorist attacks. Pre-emptive action whether at home or abroad will become harder to undertake. If that is the case, then the lessons of 9/11 will be unlearned, and we will return to the deluded notion that terrorists will leave us alone as long as we ignore them and pursue no policy which might cause them to spring into action.

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