

Analysis: Home-grown Canadian Terrorism

Mohammed Momin Khawaja was the first to be charged under Canada's 2001 Anti-Terrorism Act for plotting to kill hundreds in Britain along with co-conspirators.

Summary:

- Mohammed Momin Khawaja and his co-conspirators were from immigrant families and had been raised in western culture, and are an example of home-grown terrorism
- Because of their familiarity with the West, they knew exactly where to strike for maximum terror and how to remain under the radar by blending in with the rest of society
- Khawaja and the other plotters were scattered between the United States, Canada, and the UK, but interacted heavily through the use of modern communication devices, like cell phones, text messaging, and the Internet

On March 29th, 2004, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police arrested the then 25 year old Mohammed Momin Khawaja in suburban Ottawa. He was charged with plotting a terrorist attack in the United Kingdom, along with seven Pakistanis living in the United Kingdom and the United States who would later be arrested as well. The attempted attack would later be known as the *British Bomb Plot*. The intended targets of these attacks were a London nightclub, the Bluewater Shopping Center in Kent, and possibly the British railway system. Originally planned to incorporate a dirty bomb or ricin poisoning,



Bluewater Shopping Center, Kent, UK

they settled on 600kg of ammonium-nitrate fertilizer, which was being stored in a London storage facility. Khawaja remains jailed in Ottawa, and is due to stand trial next year. Despite their full interaction with and absorption of Western Culture, he and his fellow collaborators remain as examples of homegrown terrorism within immigrant communities

The Suspected Collaborators of the British Bomb Plot¹:

- Mohammed Momin Khawaja, Canadian, 25
- Mohammed Junaid Babar, American, 31
- Jawad Akbar, British, 22
- Salahuddin Amin, British, 30
- Anthony Garcia, British, 27
- Nabeel Hussain, British, 20
- Omar Khayam, British, 24
- Shujah-Ud-Din Mahmood, 19
- Waheed Mahmood, British, 33

Profile: Mohammed Momin Khawaja:

Early Years

Khawaja began his life far from the radical terrorism that would eventually lead to his arrest. He was born in 1979 in Canada to Pakistani immigrants, and spent his early years in the Ottawa suburb of Orleans, where he played ice hockey with his siblings on a traveling league. However from 1988-1993, Khawaja lived with his family in Yanbu, Saudi Arabia, where they relocated temporarily. Khawaja's



father worked at a nearby technical college in Saudi Arabia. His father was also living there at the time of his son's arrest, and Saudi officials subsequently arrested him.

After returning to Canada and graduating from high school, he attended Algonquin College, a local community college where he majored in computer programming. In 2000 he began teaching children the Koran and Islamic history at a local mosque in Cumberland, Ontario. As he became more religious, Khawaja grew a beard and began wearing more traditional Pakistani clothing. After graduating from Algonquin College in 2001, Khawaja went to Pakistan, reportedly to look for a wife². Additionally throughout this time, Khawaja kept a weblog, posting his increasing interest in radical Islam³.

The Pakistan Connection

According to British prosecutors, it was during this trip to Pakistan that Khawaja met four of his eventual British co-conspirators at an al-Qaeda training camp in Malakand. There they learned bomb-making techniques and experimented with ammonium nitrate and aluminum powder. Khawaja returned to Canada later that summer and began working as a contractor for a computer software operator with the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade⁴. According to Canadian authorities, Khawaja did not have access to any classified materials⁵.

During the summer of 2003, Khawaja returned to Pakistan to visit Zeba Khan, a woman whom he had met over the Internet, and at one time had been unofficially engaged to. On at least one occasion, he had dinner at Khan's house with Mohammed Junaid Babar, a naturalized American citizen who later plead guilty in the U.S. on terrorism charges as one of Khawaja's fellow plotters. Khan eventually placed a notice on the Internet announcing her engagement to Khawaja, but the engagement was soon called off. When he returned to Canada at the beginning of November 2003, Khawaja began plotting to attack Britain.

The Plot:

Operational Details of the British Bomb Plot

In October 2003, one of Khawaja's British co-conspirators bought 600 kilograms of ammonium-nitrate fertilizer⁶. During the transaction, the shopkeeper later recalled the odd request to authorities, stating that it would be enough to fertilize "four or five football pitches."⁷ The fertilizer was placed in a 90-square-meter rented storage facility in west London, until the plotters could further plan their operation.



In Canada, Khawaja checked on the status of his technical work for the attack. Khawaja's projects included a pen-sized detonator and a signal jammer disguised as cell phone, which was designed to prevent other signals from setting off the bomb prematurely. Khawaja indicated in an email dated 25 January 2004 that he had gotten the devices working and that he would book a flight to the UK as soon as possible⁸. In mid-February, he arrived in London on an Air Canada flight to Heathrow, where he met two of his co-conspirators. In the following days, the men were seen looking at pictures of detonators at an Internet café.

During the course of several bugged conversations, they also spoke frequently of Khawaja's "remote-controlled device"⁹. Shortly thereafter, NSA officers at Fort Meade intercepted an email message between Britain and Pakistan regarding the planned attack. Intelligence officials in Canada and Britain were notified.

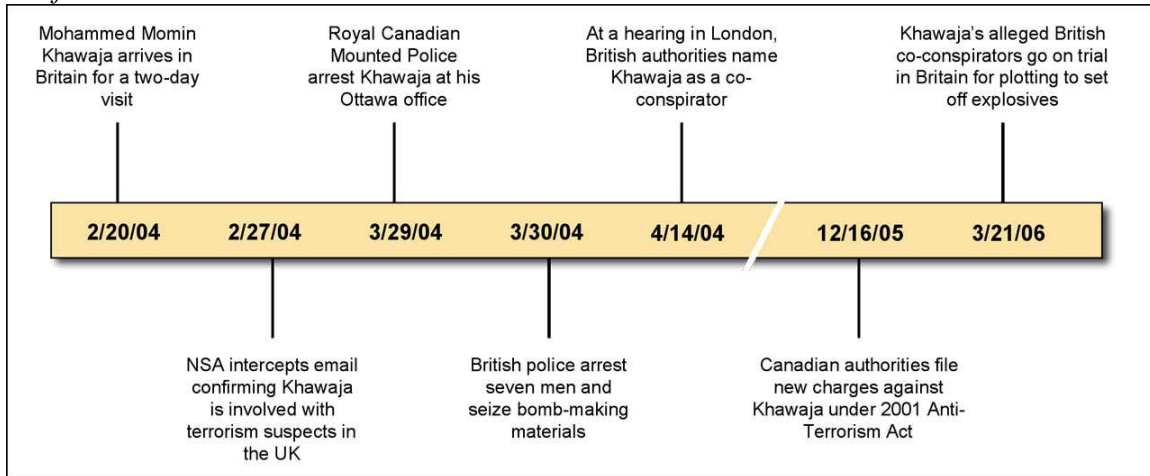
Outcome

By February 2004, employees at the storage depot became suspicious about the large quantity of fertilizer being stored. They contacted police, who investigated and replaced the fertilizer with an inert substance¹⁰. The private citizens were of course unaware of earlier precautions that had already been taken (the wire-tapping of the plotters' conversations). At this point the authorities took more severe precautions.¹¹ Eerily, shortly before the arrest of the conspirators in March, the British plotters commented to employees that by the end of the month they would no longer need the storage space.



A month after Khawaja returned to Canada, RCMP agents raided his family home and seized evidence, including a jamming device that could block cell phones in a limited area, circuit boards that made use of an encoded frequency "often used in the construction of improvised devices"¹², and numerous jihad-related web documents. Khawaja was taken into custody at his office. Following the raid in Canada, hundreds of Scotland Yard officers were involved in the arrest of the remaining suspects in the UK, who are currently standing trial as of 16 March 2006.

Timeline of Events



Motivation

At a general level, the attacks in Britain were planned in retaliation for continued British involvement in the Iraq War. Ironically, one of the conspirators had been a victim of the 9/11 attacks. The mother of Mohammed Babar (both American citizens) worked in the World Trade Center, but escaped unharmed and survived. Yet Babar would travel within a few weeks to Pakistan in an attempt to join the fight against the American invasion of Afghanistan. However, he never engaged in direct combat due to his failure to make the right connections in Pakistan. Babar had been a hardened extremist since the Gulf War, and jumped at his chance to participate in *jihad* ¹³. His motivation for the attacks was the Afghan war itself. The British plotters felt that the UK had not yet been punished for its support of the United States, as these events all occurred before the 7th July 2005 bombings¹⁴.

The conspirators were fully prepared to kill: they fully subscribed to the notion that Islam justifies killing unbelievers, or *kufar* . In one communications intercept, a British suspect, Omar Khyam, said, “When we kill the *kuf* , this is because we know Allah hates the *kufs* ¹⁵.” Khawaja and his co-conspirators were also said to have particularly admired the March 2004 rail strike in Madrid. Waheed Mahmood remarked: “Spain was a beautiful job, weren’t it, absolutely beautiful, man, so much impact¹⁶.” At the same time, the conspirators were steeped in Western popular culture. Internet passwords were based on references from Hollywood movies, and their speech was peppered with colloquialisms, rooted in hip-hop culture. These individuals were fully immersed in Western culture and understood it completely, adding to their ability to fit into society undetected, despite their dangerous and anti-social intentions.

Khawaja and his fellow plotters’ connection to and envelopment within Western society gave them the ability to pick targets that were less likely to be suspected, such as the Bluewater Shopping Center in Kent. Their key goal was to lash out at unsuspecting citizens, to provoke violence and panic. It was not until both private citizens and members of the police noticed their suspicious behavior that they were finally caught.

Law Enforcement Tactics:

In a world of increasing complication and interconnectivity, loyalties between ancestry and place of birth can be shifted, capable of fostering distrust within a society. Despite cultural agreement and immersion in the West, citizens born within their place of birth are still capable of hostile plots against their home countries. Travel in the Muslim world can serve as a radicalizing force for young Muslims living in the West. These individuals typically do not identify strongly with either their parents' culture or the culture of their new home and are searching for meaning and a place in the world. Even those who seem to be well acclimated and immersed in the new culture are susceptible to extremism. Style of dress and a radicalized personality can also be key clues to the level of resentment of their homeland. Khawaja's own blog also featured entries that indicated his growing radical interest.¹⁷

Web-based surveillance and cell phone monitoring can be a highly effective counterterrorism tools, particularly against homegrown terrorists. Particularly in the West, these individuals may find it difficult to coordinate their operations without using such technologies, having grown up with them: the plotters regularly used email, cell phones, and text messaging¹⁸. Already, many potential terrorists are using the Internet to get in contact with each other internationally, increasing the risk of radicalism and violence. Larger, non-Federal law enforcement agencies should develop the capacity to search the Internet for signs of terrorism and traditional crime.

Law enforcement officers working in partnership with community members can play a critical role in monitoring suspicious patterns of behavior at a local level – for example, the purchase of unusually large quantities of ammonium-nitrate. In this case, the large quantities of fertilizer were noted as odd, but this information was not given to the authorities for a few months, delaying the process in which the plotters were caught. Information sharing not only between government agencies, but between the state and the private sector are extremely important and a useful tool in uncovering such plots. Officers can provide surveys and communicate with local citizens to help uncover this information from individuals who might not make the connection but can provide valuable support in putting together a lead. The key is to provide specific context of how terrorists are likely to exploit a particular community activity and empower members of that community to report signs of trouble that they encounter in their normal routines. The challenge is to create a large number of trained and passive observers, and not a body of aggressive spies. Additionally, sharing data between government agencies of countries is extremely important between allied nations, in order to disseminate information quickly and efficiently that will disrupt international terrorist plots. A national network of state and local foreign law enforcement liaisons is indispensable to that effort.

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- ¹ Steele, John. Telegraph News. "Gang plotted to buy a radioactive bomb from Russia and attack shopping centre." 23 March 2006. Available via web:
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2006/03/23/nplot23.xml&sSheet=/news/2006/03/23/ixhome.html>
- ² The Fifth Estate. "The Canadian: Chronology of Mohammed Momin Khawaja." CBC-TV, 2006. Available via web:
<http://www.cbc.ca/fifth/thecanadian.html>
- ³ Ottawa Citizen. "Momin Khawaja constitutes the Canadian end of the conspiracy." 23 March 2006. §240. Available via web: <http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/news/story.html?id=408dc2ed-d950-4ee5-a4b7-392eb5faaf34&k=75162>
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Hasan, Khalid. Daily Times. "Arrested Canadian Pakistani linked to British raids." 1 April 2006. Available via web:
http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story_1-4-2004_pg7_49
- ⁶ BBC News. "Bomb Ingredients kept in depot." 22 March 2006. Available via web:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4833706.stm>
- ⁷ Freeze, Colin. Globe and Mail. "Canadian built detonator for terrorist plot, trial told." 23 March 2006.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ BBC News. "Bomb Ingredients kept in depot." 22 March 2006. Available via web:
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/4833706.stm>
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- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ BBC News. "Supergrass tells of terror fight." 24 March 2006. Available via web:
<http://212.58.240.36/1/hi/uk/4835666.stm>
- ¹⁴ Ottawa Citizen. "Momin Khawaja constitutes the Canadian end of the conspiracy." 23 March 2006. §67. Available via web: <http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/news/story.html?id=408dc2ed-d950-4ee5-a4b7-392eb5faaf34&k=75162>
- ¹⁵ Cowan, Rosie. Guardian Unlimited. "British Suspects considered blowing up London club, court told". London, UK. 23 March 2006. Available via web: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/>
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- ¹⁷ Ottawa Citizen. "Momin Khawaja constitutes the Canadian end of the conspiracy." 23 March 2006. §240. Available via web: <http://www.canada.com/ottawacitizen/news/story.html?id=408dc2ed-d950-4ee5-a4b7-392eb5faaf34&k=75162>
- ¹⁸ Ibid. §220.