By Fred Burton and Scott Stewart

On April 8, British authorities mounted a series of raids in Merseyside, Manchester and Lancashire that resulted in the arrest of 12 men suspected of being involved in a plot to conduct attacks over the Easter holiday weekend. In a press conference the following day, Prime Minister Gordon Brown noted that the men arrested were allegedly involved in "a very big terrorist plot." British authorities have alleged that those arrested sought to conduct suicide bombing attacks against a list of soft targets that included shopping centers, a train station and a nightclub.

The searches and arrests targeting the suspects purportedly involved in the plot, which was dubbed Operation Pathway, had to be accelerated after Bob Quick, the assistant commissioner of the Metropolitan Police in charge of terrorism investigations, inadvertently allowed reporters to see a classified document pertaining to the operation as he was entering 10 Downing Street to brief Brown and Home Secretary Jacqui Smith on April 8. An embarrassed Quick resigned April 9 over the gaffe.

In spite of the leak, the British authorities were successful in detaining all of the targeted suspects, though the authorities have reportedly not been able to recover explosive material or other bomb-making evidence they were seeking. British authorities arrested 12 suspects, 11 of whom were Pakistani citizens. Smith told British Parliament on April 20 that all 11 of the Pakistani nationals entered the United Kingdom on student visas. The youngest of the Pakistani suspects, who is reportedly still a teenager, was remanded to the custody of British immigration authorities to face deportation proceedings April 9. The rest of the 11 suspects were released by British authorities April 21, though ten were placed in the custody of immigration officials.

Many of the specific details of the plot have not yet come out, and due to the sensitive nature of the intelligence sources and methods involved in these types of investigations, more details may never be fully divulged now that there will be no criminal trial. However, when viewed in the historical and tactical context of other terror plots and attacks (in the United Kingdom and elsewhere), there are some very interesting conclusions that can be drawn from this series of events and the few facts that have been released to the public so far.

This case also highlights the tension that exists within the counterterrorism community between advocates of strategies to disrupt terrorist attacks and those who want to ensure that terror suspects can be convicted in a court of law.

Targets

Among of the most significant things that have come to light so far regarding the thwarted plot are the alleged targets. According to press reports, the British MI5 surveillance teams assigned

to monitor the activities of the purported plotters observed some of them videotaping themselves outside of the Arndale and Trafford shopping centers in Manchester, as well as at St. Ann's Square, which lies in the center of Manchester's main shopping district. Other reports suggest that the plotters had also conducted surveillance of Manchester's Piccadilly train station, an intercity train station that is one of the busiest in the United Kingdom outside London, and Manchester's Birdcage nightclub.

These targets are significant for several reasons. First, they are all soft targets -- that is, targets with very little security. As STRATFOR has pointed out for several years now, since counterterrorism efforts have been stepped up in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, and as the tactical capability of groups like al Qaeda has been degraded, jihadist operatives have had less success targeting hardened targets and have turned instead to striking soft targets.

While authorities have moved to protect high-value targets, there simply are far too many potential targets to protect them all. Governments are stretched thin just trying to protect important government buildings, bridges, dams, nuclear power plants, airports and mass-transit systems in their jurisdiction. The reality on the ground is that there are not nearly enough resources to protect them all, much less every potential location where people concentrate in large groups - like shopping centres and nightclubs. This means that some targets are unprotected and are therefore, by definition, soft.

The selection of soft targets in this case indicates that the alleged Manchester plotters did not possess the operational capability to strike more strategic, high-value targets. While attacks against soft targets can be tragic and quite bloody, they will not have the same effect as a successful attack on high-value targets such as Parliament, the London Stock Exchange or a nuclear power station.

It is also very interesting that the plotters were purportedly looking to hit soft targets in Manchester and not soft targets in London. London, as the capital and a city that has been the centre of several plots and attacks, is generally on a higher alert than the rest of the country and therefore would likely be seen as more difficult to target. Additionally, many of the suspects lived in the Manchester area, and as we have previously discussed, grassroots operatives, who are not as well-trained as their transnational brethren, tend to "think globally and act locally," meaning that they tend to plan their attacks in familiar places where they are comfortable operating, rather than in strange and potentially more hostile environment.

In addition to targeting locations like shopping centres and the train station, where there were expected to be large crowds over the holiday weekend, the alleged plotters also apparently looked at the Birdcage nightclub, an establishment that is famous for its "flamboyant and spectacular" shows featuring female impersonators. This is a location the alleged plotters likely considered a symbol of Western decadence (like establishments that serve alcohol in Muslim countries).

Flawed tradecraft

As noted above, the alleged plotters had been under surveillance by MI5. This indicates that

their operational security had been compromised, either via human or technical means. Furthermore, the suspects did not appear to possess any surveillance detection capability - or even much situational awareness - as they went out into Manchester to conduct pre-operational surveillance of potential targets while under government surveillance themselves. Furthermore, the suspects' surveillance techniques appear to have been very rudimentary in that they lacked both cover for action and cover for status while conducting their surveillance operations.

This aspect of the investigation reinforces two very important points that STRATFOR has been making for some time now. First, most militant groups do not provide very good surveillance training and as a result, poor surveillance tradecraft has long proven to be an Achilles' heel for militants. Second, because of this weakness, countersurveillance operations can be very effective at catching militant operatives when they are most vulnerable - during the surveillance phase of the terrorist attack cycle.

Media reports indicated that during Operation Pathway, British authorities intercepted a series of Internet exchanges between the suspects suggested a terror strike was imminent. Furthermore, among the locations raided April 8 was the Cyber Net Cafe in Cheetham Hill, an establishment where British authorities observed the suspects using computers to communicate. Not only is this electronic surveillance significant in that it allowed the authorities to surmise the approximate timing of the attack, but perhaps just as important, this ability to monitor the suspects' communications will allow the authorities to identify other militants in the United Kingdom and beyond.

Indeed, in several previous cases related to the United Kingdom, such as the investigations involving the U.S. arrest of Mohammed Junaid Babar and the U.K. arrest of Younis Tsouli, authorities were able to use communications from militant suspects to identify and roll up militant cells in other countries. Therefore, we will not be at all surprised to hear at some point in the future that British authorities were be able use the communications of the recently arrested suspects to tip off authorities in the United States, Canada, other European countries or elsewhere about the militant activities of people the suspects were in contact with.

Links to Pakistan

And speaking of elsewhere, as noted above, 11 of the arrested suspects were Pakistani nationals who entered the U.K. on student visas. At this point it is not exactly clear if the British believe the 11 suspects were radical militants specifically sent to the United Kingdom to conduct attacks or if they arrived without malicious intent and were then radicalized in the Petri dish of Islamist extremism that so rapidly replicates inside the British Muslim community - what we have come to refer to as Londonistan.

Many British lawmakers and media reports have made a huge issue out of the fact that 11 of the alleged plotters entered the United Kingdom on student visas, but even if the suspects were radicals who used student visas as a way to enter the United Kingdom, this is by no means a new tactic as some are reporting. STRATFOR has long discussed the use of student visas, bogus political asylum claims and other forms of immigration fraud that have commonly been used by militants. In fact, there have been numerous prior examples of jihadist operatives using

student visas, such as the following:

While Sept. 11 hijackers Mohamed Atta and Marwan al-Shehhi initially entered the United States on tourist visas, they were approved for M-1 student visas shortly before carrying out their attacks.

Youssef Samir Megahed, who was arrested in possession of an improvised explosive device (IED) in August 2007 and later sentenced to a 15-year prison sentence, was a Kuwaiti engineering student who entered the United States on a student visa.

Mohammed Aatique, a convicted member of the "Virginia Jihad Network" who was sentenced to 10 years in prison for conspiracy and weapons violations, also entered the United States from Pakistan as an engineering student.

In some ways, connections between the alleged plotters and militant groups in Pakistan such as al Qaeda or the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) would be more analytically significant than if they turn out to be grassroots operatives. The operational security, skills and terrorist tradecraft exhibited by the plotters are about what one would expect to see in a grassroots militant organization. This level of sophistication is, however, far less than one would expect from a transnational organization. Therefore, if this was an al Qaeda operation, it shows how far the group has fallen in the past eight years. If it was the TTP, it means that our previous estimate of their operational ability outside of Pakistan was fairly accurate.

Lack of evidence

To date, the British authorities have not been able to find the explosive material and IED components they were expecting to find. This might mean that the materials may still be hidden somewhere and could be used in a future attack. It is also quite possible, and perhaps more likely, that this lack of evidence is an indication that the plot was not quite as far along as the British authorities believed. Perhaps the references the suspects allegedly made to launching the attack on a bank holiday pertained to a holiday later in the year.

While the plot as described by the British authorities would not have been a significant, strategic threat to the United Kingdom, it could have been quite deadly and could very well have surpassed the July 7, 2005, attacks in terms of final body count. Because of this potential destruction, it is quite possible that the British government decided to err on the side of disruption rather than on the side of prosecution. This is something we have seen in the investigation of several other plots in recent years in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, perhaps most notably in the August 2006 Heathrow plot, in which a cell of operatives was preparing to bomb a series of trans-Atlantic airline flights using liquid explosives.

It is much more difficult to obtain a conviction for a conspiracy to commit an act of terrorism than it is to obtain a conviction for an attack that was successfully conducted. Once the attack is executed, there is no longer much room to wrangle in court over things such as intent or capability. Governments also frequently know things via intelligence they cannot prove to the standards required for a conviction in a court of law.

This was seen in the Heathrow case, where only three of the eight suspects were convicted of the main charges during that trial, which ended in September 2008. (The other five suspects had pled guilty to lesser charges.) During that case there was reportedly some tension between the U.S. and British authorities over when to wrap up the Heathrow plotters -- some of the British apparently wanted to wait a while longer to secure more damning evidence, while the Americans were reportedly more interested in ensuring that the plot was disrupted than they were in obtaining convictions. It is likely the same dynamic was at play during the investigation of the Manchester case.

Although Quick's disclosure did hasten the launch of Operation Pathway by a few hours, it did not significantly alter the timing of the investigation - the British authorities were preparing to execute an array of searches and arrests. From an ethical standpoint (and, not insignificantly in this day and age, a political aspect) it is deemed better by many to disrupt a plot early and risk the terror suspects being acquitted than it is to accidentally allow them to conduct an attack while waiting to gather the evidence required for an ironclad court case. Disruption can have an impact on the success of prosecutions, but in the eyes of a growing number of policymakers, that impact is offset by the lives it saves.