

Anthony Bubalo and Michael Fullilove
Blair's front line - Terror in London
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The bombings show London matters as much as Baghdad in the war against terror, write Anthony Bubalo and Michael Fullilove.

THE world is already asking whether London, like Madrid before it, has paid the price this week for its close alliance with the US and its prominent role in the war in Iraq, a question that is obviously relevant to Australia as well.

But in focusing on motive, we should not ignore an equally important factor in determining where terrorists will strike next: opportunity.

London in some respects has become the de facto capital of the Middle East. Many immigrants from across the region have settled there. Middle Eastern dissidents and intellectuals are drawn by the opportunity to speak freely, and some of the Arab world's leading newspapers are published out of the British capital.

But there is a darker side to the city's lively multicultural fabric. Chased out of the Middle East by the local security forces, radical groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir have also set up shop in London, earning it the sobriquet "Londonistan" in some quarters.

Some of these immigrants, like Jordanian-born political exile Abu Qutada, arrested by British authorities in 2002, are accused of having direct links to al-Qa'ida. Some have inspired a radical minority among London's diverse Muslim community, such as the notorious Muhajiroun group, which openly declared its support for the September 11, 2001, terror attacks in the US.

Although it remains unclear at this stage whether local groups were involved in Thursday's atrocities, even if they were the work of a foreign cell it is likely to have had some local assistance.

Indeed, given the concentration of militant talent in London, the question is not why London was attacked but why it has taken so long. One reason has undoubtedly been the professionalism and vigilance of British intelligence and security forces. But another probable factor was the calculation on the part of the terrorists that such an attack would provoke an enormous crackdown on all shades of radical Islamist and jihadist activism.

That the perpetrators of this attack were prepared to make this sacrifice may reflect a degree of desperation. Security forces across the world have made it harder for terrorists to travel freely and strike targets away from their support networks.

And while Iraq has undoubtedly been a boon for terrorist groups, it has also been something of a distraction. With militants flowing into Iraq, global jihad has appeared less global in recent years, with most attacks concentrated on the Iraqi front line.

Domestically, the bombing will cause the British authorities to shine an even brighter spotlight on the activities -- and perhaps the immigration status -- of a range of radical groups and individuals residing in London.

But care is also required. A war on terror requires precision strikes, not carpet bombing. Insofar as al-Qa'ida and its sympathisers have an objective, it is to polarise the world and encourage Muslims to feel threatened by the West and to respond violently. A dual approach is required on the part of Western governments: pursue the terrorists unceasingly while reassuring the broader Muslim community that they are an integral part of society.

There is also the question of how the events of Thursday will affect London's foreign policy. The attack on Madrid commuter trains on March 11 last year, which killed 191 people, boosted the electoral prospects of the opposition Socialist Party, which won the national election three days later and proceeded to withdraw the Spanish contingent from Iraq.

There's no doubt that some elements of the British Left will take the Spanish line, arguing for a retrenchment of British forces abroad. The rogue MP George Galloway has already said: "We argued that the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq would increase the threat of terrorist attack in Britain. Tragically, Londoners have now paid the price of the Government ignoring such warnings."

This argument is unlikely to be a winning one, for national and personal reasons. The core element of the British self-image is that of resilience and indeed it has a basis in fact, as seen by Londoners' response to the Blitz of 1940-41, which killed tens of thousands of the capital's citizens. Crucially, the British Conservative Opposition has already locked itself into supporting government policy. If anything, the Tories may argue for a harder line.

Furthermore, it would be out of character for Tony Blair to step back in these circumstances. During the course of his prime ministership, criticisms of Blair as a stand-for-nothing leader who pandered to public opinion have given way to the opposite line, that he has pursued his policies regardless of the misgivings of the British public or his colleagues. Blair is aware that his historical legacy rests, in part, on the course of the war against terror. Thursday's bombings show that progress will be determined as much by the Government's actions in London as in Baghdad.

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