

Many unanswered questions as Tories exploit London terror attack

By Robert Stevens
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The second fatality of Friday's terrorist attack in London was named Sunday as 23-year-old Saskia Jones. The Cambridge University graduate was killed alongside fellow graduate Jack Merritt after both were stabbed by 28-year-old Usman Khan.

Two other people attacked by Khan are in hospital, with the condition of one victim improving from critical to stable. They are expected to recover. Another person was released early from hospital.

Merritt and Jones had been attending a prisoner rehabilitation conference organised by "Learning Together," based at Cambridge University, that brings together prisoners and higher education institutions. Merritt was a coordinator and Jones a volunteer with the programme.

Khan was recently released from prison after being convicted under anti-terrorist legislation. He undertook a "deradicalization course," involving a Learning Together team including Merritt.

Metropolitan Police Commissioner Cressida Dick said that officers were called at 1:58 p.m. about a stabbing at the Learning Together event at Fishmongers' Hall, next to London Bridge. Staff, conference participants and passers-by confronted Khan in the conference and then on London Bridge, armed with chairs, fire extinguishers and a narwhal tusk. Within five minutes armed officers from the City of London police force confronted Khan on London Bridge and shot him dead.

As with all terrorist attacks, nothing reported officially can be taken at face value. Already several troubling questions demand an answer.

Khan, like every perpetrator of recent terrorist attack in the UK and internationally, was known to the police and intelligence agencies. Worse still, his movements were being actively monitored at the time of the attack since he was on probation and was seen by the probation service twice a week. He had only been released from prison in

December 2018 and was out on license.

One of the conditions of his release was that he wear an electronic tag. He was living in Stafford and would have needed permission to travel to London. The police have stated that on the day of the attack, Khan was in compliance with all conditions of his release. *Sky News* reported he was given permission to travel into central London on Friday by police and the probation service.

This all suggests that the intelligence agencies knew Khan was attending the Learning Together event when he went there armed with a knife and wearing a fake suicide vest.

He was also given permission to travel to Whitehall earlier in the year. Whitehall is the main thoroughfare from Trafalgar Square to Parliament. As well as being the location of the prime minister's residence 10 Downing Street, it is the location of many government buildings.

Khan was arrested in 2010, along with eight others, and jailed in 2012. They had all been being under close surveillance by the intelligence agencies. The nine were imprisoned after being charged with plotting to blow up the London Stock Exchange, with Khan also charged with planning to build a "terrorist military training facility" on land owned by his family in Kashmir.

In 2012, after pleading guilty, Khan was sentenced to indeterminate detention for "public protection (IPP). This carried a minimum jail term of eight years. Someone sentenced to IPP could only be released by a Parole Board after an assessment of the risk posed to the public and their victims and whether this can be managed in the community by criminal justice authorities.

The following year, the Court of Appeal quashed the sentence, replacing it with a 16-year-fixed term of which Khan was to serve half behind bars. He was released automatically as planned.

Other questions surround events on London Bridge. Khan was lying on the ground after being tackled by

members of the public trying to disarm him of knives, including one duct taped to his hand. Footage shows a man in a suit, who had managed to take a knife off Khan, leaving the scene and walking away carrying the knife at his side. A police officer is seen dragging another man off Khan, and a few seconds later another officer shoots Khan dead.

The British Transport Police have confirmed that the man walking away with the knife was a serving BTP plain clothes officer. It is not clear why the BTP officer was present and why he walked *away* from the scene.

There is, moreover, the politically fortuitous timing of the terror attack.

The most recent terror attacks in the capital, and the Manchester Arena attack in 2017, all took place either before or *during* general election campaigns.

Labour MP Jo Cox was killed by a fascist in the last week of the 2016 EU referendum campaign.

In March 2017, in the lead up to the snap June general election, five were killed and dozens injured in Westminster. Khalid Masood began his attack by driving a grey Hyundai across Westminster Bridge, hitting pedestrians.

The Manchester bombing took place in May, with Salman Abedi killing 22 people. This was following on June 3, 2017—just five days before the election—by the London Bridge and Borough Market attacks, during which three terrorists killed eight people.

Then-Tory Prime Minister Theresa May tried to use these attacks to denounce Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn for being soft on terrorism, which backfired badly.

Despite this history and the febrile atmosphere of the present election campaign, the UK's terrorism threat level was downgraded on November 4 from "severe" to "substantial." This move was remarkable given that the December 12 general election was called by Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson just days earlier, on October 30.

Predictably, the brutal murder of the two young students was seized on by Johnson and the pro-Tory media, with the *Sunday Times* leading on a promise from the prime minister to "lock terrorists up and throw away the key."

Blaming legislation on early release drafted by the Labour Party for Khan's crime, Johnson said that 74 people convicted of terrorist offences would have their license conditions reviewed. "It's absolutely clear that we can't carry on with the failed approaches of the past. If you are convicted of a serious terrorist offence, there should be a mandatory minimum sentence of 14 years,

and some should never be released. For all terrorism and extremist offences the sentence announced by the judge must be the time actually served. These criminals must serve every day of their sentence, with no exceptions."

Johnson accused Labour's election manifesto of placing "unacceptable limits on our intelligence services... It concerns me that Jeremy Corbyn is setting out plans to weaken our system and make it more difficult for our security services to stop people who want to do us harm."

On the BBC's *Andrew Marr Show*, he blamed the early release rules on a "leftie government."

Corbyn was keen to show that he was now on message. Speaking to Sophy Ridge on *Sky News*, he said that he had been critical of shoot-to-kill policies in the past, but the officers at London Bridge had "no other choice" other than to kill Khan.

"They were stuck in an awful situation where there was a credible threat of a bomb belt around his body... The point I made in the past, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland—this is going back quite a long way—was there was a concern in Northern Ireland that police were adopting a shoot to kill policy where it was possible to arrest them instead of shoot them. There should never be a first alternative to shoot people. But if there is no alternative then that's what you do."

The statement released Sunday by Jack Merritt's father is a powerful rebuke to the torrent of law-and-order rhetoric. He wrote that his son was an "intelligent, thoughtful and empathetic person who was looking forward to building a future with his girlfriend Leanne.

"Jack lived his principles; he believed in redemption and rehabilitation, not revenge, and he always took the side of the underdog.

"We know Jack would not want this terrible, isolated incident to be used as a pretext by the government for introducing even more draconian sentences on prisoners, or for detaining people in prison for longer than necessary."

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