

Public Enemy No. 1

By Torcuil Creighton

sundayherald.com | May 30, 2004

When James Ujamma, a former worshipper at the notorious Finsbury Park mosque in north London, was released from a US detention centre on April 19, Abu Hamza's fate was sealed. The release of Ujamma, an American Muslim convert, after having served less than two years of a sentence for conspiring to help the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, was what US authorities and the frustrated UK Home Secretary David Blunkett had been waiting for. The same day a sealed indictment of 11 charges was laid against Abu Hamza, "Britain's bin Laden", in a New York court.

Ujamma had cut a deal with the US authorities to escape serious terrorist charges. He is to become a star witness against the Egyptian-born cleric if attempts to extradite him from Britain to face terrorist charges in America are successful. Ujamma had run Hamza's website – Supporters of Sharia – in London in the 1990s and travelled to Afghanistan on his behalf to help set up training camps there and in the US. He knows the inside story of Abu Hamza that US officials claim will emerge during his trial. Here was someone from the inside of Hamza's clique of young acolytes who could link Hamza with the sponsorship of al-Qaeda terrorism, something which the British courts and authorities had noticeably failed to do.

The simple reason is that Ujamma's evidence would not stand a chance of being accepted in a British court. He would have been dismissed as an unreliable witness, having been a terrorist conspirator and having struck a deal for early release. Neither would a British court have accepted the illegal satellite communication intercepts which form part of the US case against Hamza.

Similarly, the evidence of Co-conspirator Two (CC2), as he was referred to in Belmarsh Magistrates Court last week, would not stand up in a UK court. CC2 is thought to be Feroz Abbasi, one of the Britons still held in the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, who has been interrogated by the US military without lawyers being present.

Abbasi, who the US authorities claim travelled with Ujamma to a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan, is still in a legal limbo in the US detention camp in Cuba but the evidence gathered from him and from Ujamma are enough to put the Finsbury Park cleric into a US dock and back into the limelight in Britain as public enemy number one.

Public Enemy No. 1 / 2

If Abu Hamza did not exist then the British press would have to invent him. The hook-handed, one-eyed, hate-filled “bin Laden of Britain”, as The Sun newspaper has dubbed him, perfectly fulfils the role of terrorist bogeyman for the tabloids. He is also, it seemed last week, a convenient pillory post for the US and UK governments beset by problems in the war on terror.

Coming in the week that US authorities put themselves and an alarmed nation on high alert for seven wanted terrorists, the smoothly unrolling extradition announcement on both sides of the Atlantic, with a press scoop thrown in, might have appeared too convenient.

The US attorney-general John Ashcroft, standing next to a picture of a hook-waving Hamza, couldn't have looked more delighted as he declared the capture of a big cat in the world of terrorism who is probably one of the most recognisable men on the streets of London.

The Sun newspaper, which has been hounding the UK government to deal with Hamza for years, ran a triumphant front-page story in its second edition on Wednesday night predicting a pre-dawn raid on Hamza's north London home, in what looked like a smoothly co-ordinated leak. This not only forced the police to act quickly, but also lent credence to the theory that the cleric had become a handy political pawn to bolster the US in the war on terror and to help Home Secretary David Blunkett prove, once again, how tough he is on terrorists in the UK.

Blunkett, speaking the next day on Radio 4, was sure the leak to The Sun, which forced the police to make the arrest three hours ahead of schedule, had not come from the Home Office. But in the mirrored world of sourcing political stories such a denial usually raises suspicions that the reverse is true. What was true was that Blunkett, who has suffered a series of hurdles in trying to strip Hamza of his UK citizenship, was glad to have him off the street and the tabloid press off his back.

The US authorities, like the UK secret services and the Home Office, were aware of Hamza's activities for years but were left the losers at each successive attempt to entrap him in the courts. Thought of more as a buffoon than a terrorist mastermind because of his outrageous public statements, Hamza needed no help from the tabloids to become a terrorist caricature. The tall, weighty, former-bouncer-turned-religious hardman cuts a frightening figure with his disfigured face and metal hooks for hands, the result, he claims, of a landmine explosion in Afghanistan. He does a strong line in venomous religious rants against the decadent West and he has expressed admiration for bin Laden but has denied supporting terrorism. He described the September 11 attacks as a professional “demolition job”, perhaps with reference to his own past as an engineer.

Mustafa Kamel arrived in Britain from Egypt in the early 1980s and obtained British

Public Enemy Number 1 / 3

citizenship when he married his English wife. Although the marriage disintegrated, the couple's son turned up among the men arrested for taking hostages in the Yemen in 1998, one of the charges Hamza now faces extradition for. He has never denied his connection to the Yemeni terrorists; the eight captured men, including his son, had all come to his prayer groups.

He worked as a bouncer at a Soho nightclub to finance his studies but slowly he became more attracted to the strictest interpretations of the Koran. He returned to Egypt in 1990 and from there went to Afghanistan, then in the throes of civil war after the Russian withdrawal, where he sustained his horrific injuries.

As Abu Hamza, the hook-handed cleric, he returned to Britain in 1996, basing himself in Finsbury Park mosque and surrounding himself with a crowd of arrogant young acolytes, British-born Muslim boys who felt alienated from society and who bullied their way into controlling the mosque on his behalf.

The mosque, much to the embarrassment of the mainstream Muslim community in north London, was under occupation by Hamza and his followers until last year. During that time it was used as a platform for hatred and had been attended by Richard Reid, the "shoe bomber" and Zacarias Moussaoui, the so-called 20th hijacker of the September 11 flights.

Like other radical clerics, Muslim and Christian, Hamza is vehement in his preaching and impeccably polite in person (just think of the difference between the Rev Ian Paisley's public persona and his personal reputation as a warm-hearted prankster and you have the picture).

But Hamza is not accused of pranks. The charges being laid out by the US authorities are incredibly serious. They include helping to plot a 1998 terrorist attack in the Yemen ; funding al-Qaeda terrorist training camps in Afghanistan and organising a second terror training camp in the United States. He is also accused of financing bomb-making, hostage-taking and suicide attacks and conspiring to provide "goods and services" to the Taliban.

The indictments are highly detailed, listing satellite phones that Hamza is said to have provided to the leader of the Islamic Army of Aden and other conspirators in the 1998 hostage plot that ended with three British tourists and one Australian dead. He received calls from that satellite phone at his home in London the day before they stormed a caravan of tourist vehicles in the Yemen and took 16 people, including two Americans, hostage.

Hamza is said to have spoken to the terrorists after the attack, agreed to be their intermediary and ordered £500 of airtime for the phone. The same day, four hostages were killed when soldiers launched a rescue attempt. The satellite intercepts of the phone conversations are not admissible in British courts, although the Home Office had

Public Enemy No. 1 / 4

knowledge of them.

The US authorities also accuse Hamza of stockpiling weapons and ammunition in the United States in October 1999 to create a jihad training camp in Oregon.

To fund all this activity it is alleged that he used money raised at the Finsbury Park mosque and appealed on the internet for “Supporters of Sharia” to donate money, goods and services to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

It doesn't stop there. Five days before the September 11 attacks, he is said to have given £6,000 to the Taliban to fund a computer laboratory in Afghanistan. It is also alleged that he introduced one of the plotters to another and arranged for safe houses in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

He was “the real deal” said New York Police Commissioner Ray Kelly at the staged press conference held as the US hailed a new victory in the war on terror.

The charges put Hamza at the centre of a ring of terror connecting the September 11 bombers to the Yemeni hijackers, the Taliban, al-Qaeda training camps and the Guantanamo Bay detainees. His name will be raised at terrorist trials in the Yemen later this year when 12 go on trial over the attack on the USS Cole in October 2000 in which 17 US sailors were killed. He is also being linked to the bombing of the French oil tanker Limburg in 2002 and there are dark hints that he had information predicting the September 11 attacks from Moussau, the so-called 20th hi-jacker who was known to the cleric.

Yet for a terrorist mastermind Hamza was not hard to find. Police knew he would be asleep at the Shepherd's Bush home he shares with his new wife and six children when they called early on Thursday morning. According to neighbours he left quietly in a police van.

Usually a trip up the Seven Sisters Road into north London would have uncovered him any Friday lunchtime over the last year. Since early 2003 Hamza has taken to sermonising on the street outside the Finsbury Park mosque since the police (in collaboration with the mosque elders and founders) ejected him from the building that had become a jihadist stronghold. He was one of those interviewees who loved attention while pretending to scorn the media. With his hooked arms hanging uselessly by his sides, his platoon of young supporters would wipe sweat from his brow while he answered questions with wilder and wilder rants that he knew would guarantee notoriety .

If he was so dangerous why was he so high-profile and why was he being left to stalk the streets of Britain, or Shepherd's Bush to be precise, where he was regarded as polite and friendly by his many non-Muslim neighbours?

The clue to why Hamza was allowed to continue operating in the UK might come from Blunkett's carefully guarded admission that the cleric was being constantly monitored by secret services, but that illegal intercepts would not be accepted by a British court. It seems

Public Enemy No. 1 / 5

Blunkett had for some time been seeking a deal with the US to rid Britain of the dangerous cleric. As much was said by The Sun's searing commentary on the arrest: "Blunkett knew he could count on our US friends after he was frustrated in his own efforts to change laws and sign treaties to ensure that Hamza and his ilk got their comeuppance."

The US indictment makes it clear the maximum sentence for hostage-taking is death or 100 years' imprisonment, something that will hardly raise an eyebrow on the other side of the Atlantic but forced Blunkett on to radio to make it clear that the UK would stand in the way of extradition if it meant the death penalty.

In court on Thursday, Hamza laughed and shrugged when asked if he would consent to being extradited to the US. Obviously he has no intention of giving the US authorities an easy time and the case could drag on for months. Meanwhile, the bin Laden of Britain has been de-hooked – his metal prosthetics have been removed from him in prison as he might prove to be a danger to himself or others.

Torcuil Creighton writes for the Sunday Herald of Glasgow, Scotland's leading Sunday newspaper