

Rampant Speculation: Uranium, Dirty Bombs and Heathrow

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The dirty bomb and its purportedly famed radiation dispersal attributes has an undeserved mythology. It serves to bloat budgets and confer grants on specious theories propounded by specious theorists. It is all rather easy to make a security threat up, and a celluloid, Hollywood scenario of a dirty bomb going off in the middle of a metropolis killing thousands is just one of those instances. Scaring people is child's play and often the work of the unscrupulous.

This month, it was announced that staff at London's Heathrow airport, where the appearance of snowflakes is enough to cancel flights, encountered what was alleged to be cargo contaminated by uranium on December 29. *The Sun* was the first paper to [scream](#) from the rooftops about a "Deadly shipment of uranium seized at Heathrow en route to Iranians based in UK". The paper went on to suggest that the material in question "can be used in a dirty bomb." In the narrative, all the appropriate countries were mentioned: dark origins in Pakistan; arrival on a flight from Oman; destination: UK-based nationals from Iran.

The relevant authorities were also involved. Border Force agents "swooped and isolated the unregistered shipment in a dedicated radioactive room." Counter-terrorism police "were alerted and a security probe launched into who sent the cargo." An unnamed source excitedly told *The Sun* that relevant security bosses "are treating this with the seriousness it deserves. Protocol was not followed and this is now an anti-terror operation."

The Met Police issued a [statement](#) on January 10 confirming that "officers from the Met's Counter Terrorism Command were contacted by Border Force colleagues at Heathrow after a very small amount of contaminated material was identified after routine screening within a package incoming to the UK on December 29."

The Daily Mail went so far as to [describe](#) the quantity as being all uranium, running into "several kilos". An unspecified source told the paper that, "The package contained kilos of uranium - but it was not weapons-grade." Never one to be troubled by the irritations of

evidence, the *Mail* ignored the Met Police's own description of the seized cargo as being contaminated material of a "very small amount". *The Guardian* was more conservative in its assessment: the shipment consisted of "metal bars embedded with uranium."

That such minute quantities were involved was also [confirmed](#) by the head of the Met's SO15 counter-terror branch, Commander Richard Smith: "I want to reassure the public that the amount of contaminated material was extremely small and has been assessed by experts as posing no threat to the public."

Commander Smith, to his credit, was not keen to nourish the tabloid fear machine. "Although our investigation remains ongoing, from our inquiries so far, it does not appear to be linked to any direct threat. As the public would expect, we will continue to follow up on all available lines of enquiry to ensure this is definitely the case."

The security experts were immediately called in to sing for their ill-deserved supper. Will Geddes [suggested](#) that this was a "dry-run" operation, despite admitting that it was "speculation" on his part. "If you are trying to move contraband through an environment like a drug dealer would, you may courier it through certain channels to see which ones work before moving larger amounts."

Further speculation from Geddes followed. "If the uranium is unrefined, it would be used in a nuclear facility, if it is refined it would be more likely to be used in a dirty bomb. If it is refined, that would indicate a malicious device of some sort."

Former commander of the UK's nuclear defence regiment Hamish De Bretton-Gordon [was troubled](#). "For the uranium to turn up on a commercial airliner from Pakistan to an Iranian address in the UK is very suspect." He proceeded to add fuel to the fire. "The nuclear threat has never been higher. Higher than it has ever been in the Cold War."

From the corridors of speculation, *The Sun* managed to pinch another opinion worthy of celebration by the jingoes, this time from an unnamed "former army chief", who claimed that the "deadly shipment could have been used for a Litvinenko-style assassination plot."

Despite the growing compendium of concerns, a more sensible [undercurrent of opinion](#) did suggest that the uranium in question was, in all likelihood, too bulky and ineffectual to be used in the making of a bomb device. Bahram Ghiassee of the Henry Jackson Society, a neoconservative outfit not always known for its moderate stance, was [critical](#) of the news coverage suggesting that the bomb scenario was even plausible. "For dirty bombs, you need highly radioactive material ... and uranium is not suitable at all."

It should have been also clear to the alarmists that detecting undeclared radioactive material at transport hubs and ports of entry [are not infrequent occurrences](#), the UK being no exception.

Since the revelation, a man in his 60s has been arrested under section 9 of the Terrorism Act of 2006, which criminalises the possession of radioactive materials with the intent of using them for terrorism purposes. He has been released on bail pending a hearing in April. While such legal wheels turn, the yellow press merchants will continue to do their worst, inflating unnecessary threats, while ignoring others.

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