

The Fatal Consequences of “Racism” Accusations

Daniel Pipes

A major act of violence could have been averted had a security guard not feared being called a “racist,” raising profound questions about the West’s ability to protect itself from jihadi attacks.

That act of violence in question: the bombing of a concert by U.S. singer Ariana Grande at England’s Manchester Arena on May 22, 2017, killing 22 and wounding over 800. The bomber, [Salman Ramadan Abedi](#), 22, was born in Manchester to refugee Islamist parents just arrived from Libya. Those who knew him described him as being very religious and not too bright.

An Al-Qaeda sympathizer, Abedi constructed a home-made bomb with thousands of nuts and bolts, placed it in a large rucksack, and made his roundabout way by foot to the arena. There he awaited the conclusion of Grande’s “Dangerous Woman” performance while sitting on steps in the public foyer. At 10:31 p.m., he stood up, crossed the foyer toward the audience exiting the hall, and detonated his device.

The Home Secretary Priti Patel established the [Manchester Arena Inquiry](#) “to find out exactly what happened” and “make recommendations to try to prevent what has gone wrong from happening again.” The inquiry revealed important information about the security that evening provided by the private firm Showsec.

The account starts with [Christopher Wild](#) as he waited for a child attending the concert. He noticed a dubious-looking Abedi about 10.15 p.m. and reported his concern to a Showsec guard, Mohammed Ali Agha, 19. Wild described Abedi as “dodgy” and “dangerous-looking” and pointed out his “massive rucksack.”

Agha asked a colleague, [Kyle Lawler](#), 18, to keep an eye on Abedi. Lawler approached within 10-15 feet of Abedi and found him “fidgety and sweaty.”

Lawler testified that he had “a bad feeling about him but did not have anything to justify that.” He admitted to some panic even as he felt “conflicted” because he sensed something awry but also saw him as “just an Asian male sitting amongst a group of white people.”

As Lawler told the inquiry,

I felt unsure about what to do. It’s very difficult to define a terrorist. For all I knew, he might have been an innocent young Asian male sitting on the steps. I did not want people to think that I was stereotyping him because of his race. ... I was scared of being wrong and being branded a racist. If I got it wrong, then I would have got into trouble. It made me hesitant about what to do. I wanted to get it right and not to mess up by overreacting or judging someone by their race.

Although Lawler admits to “a guilty feeling” and placing “a lot of blame on myself,” when asked if he still worries about being branded a racist, he replied “Yes.”

What to make of this incident? Note this key sentence: “I was scared of being wrong and being branded a racist.” In one sense, this sentiment is entirely familiar; it is, for example, why the police in Rotherham and other British cities did not crack down on Pakistani rape gangs over a period of up to sixteen years.

In another way, it is startling. For a security guard not to follow up on his suspicions out of fear of “being branded a racist” points to a crisis. Unless the suspect is a jihadi planning a murderous rampage – something not at all likely – whoever voices worries potentially opens himself to being sanctioned, being fired, press outrage, lawsuits, and even riots. Slogans like “[if you see something, say something](#)” turn out to be fraudulent. Recalling how many jihadis have been caught in the course of [routine traffic stops](#) or by [suspicious neighbors](#), this is a major problem.

Fear of the charge of racism has the counterintuitive consequence that a person who has darker skin or appears to be Muslim could [get a free pass](#); the vigilant can afford to be wrong about a blond but not about a hijabi. Even stranger is the implication that someone intending to engage in mischief could find advantage in adopting a Muslim appearance.

Effective protection requires latitude for errors. Airline captains, police on the beat, even specialists on Islam must have the freedom to express their worries without fear of press defamation, losing their jobs, or facing legal retribution.

Unless these necessary changes take place, expect more jihadi violence.

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