

## Bicycle bombs: a threat to Westminster?

On 25 June I participated in a debate held by the Royal Institute of British Architects - [“This house believe we should fortify our cities”](#). Piers Gough and I opposed the motion.

In the course of the debate the proposers, Lorraine Gamman and Adam Thorpe, raised the threat of bicycle bombs. After the debate they produced evidence to support their view that bicycle bombs were a threat to be taken seriously – now posted on [the debate website](#) . I present below my comments on their evidence.

## Bicycle Bombs

In the debate about fortifying our cities much of the discussion of bicycle bombs and the need to defend against them focused on the ban on parking bicycles in selected parts of Westminster near the Houses of Parliament and other government buildings.

Lorraine Gamman and Adam Thorpe have helpfully provided the evidence in the list below on which they have based their opinion that bicycle bombs pose a real threat against which potential terrorist targets should be defended.

Lorraine says: “This list is from open access sources Adam and I researched – obviously Nactso/ Home Office have access to sensitive information on this subject (or unreported incidents) that we are not privy to so do not think this a definitive list...rather just the one we formed our opinions from.”

### BICYLCLE BOMBS

DATE	LOCATION	REMARKS	TERRORIST GROUP
*** 25.08.39	Coventry	Bicycle packed with explosives detonates and kills five people. (Barnes and Richards arrested)	PIRA
09.06.79	Streatly Berkshire	Explosion in a mail bag on a postmans cycle. (postal device)	PIRA
June 1982	Frankfurt Germany	Bomb detonates on a bicycle outside the US Army Centre.	RED ARMY FACTION RAF
29.08.85	Northern Ireland Belfast - Dundalk	Booby trapped bicycle on a train explodes and injures two RUC and other security personnel.	INLA
05.08.88	Ratingen Germany	Bomb planted on a bicycle explodes at Roy Barracks.	PIRA
25.03.89	Armritsar India	Person killed when an IED on a bicycle explodes.	SIKH
30.03.90	Northern Ireland Newry	Bomb constructed in a cycle chained to a lamp post. (photo flash unit operated device)	PIRA
* 30.01.92	Batticaloa Sri Lanka	IEDs in two cycles function, three people killed.	TAMIL TIGERS LTTE

30.01.92 Batticaloa Sri Lanka IED explodes, at Kabimai Police Station. TAMIL TIGERS LTTE

\*\* 01.05.93 Colombo Sri Lanka Suicide bomber riding a cycle bomb which detonates and kills the President of Sri Lanka. TAMIL TIGERS LTTE

13.08.94 London Road Bognor Regis Sussex Explosion on device in pannier of hired cycle PIRA

13.08.94 The Pier Brighton Sussex Explosion on device in pannier of hired cycle PIRA

05.08.99 Vavuniya, Sri Lanka Suicide Bomber peddled cycle strapped with explosives up to a truck carrying members of the Anti-Terrorist Branch, triggering a blast that killed twelve and injured thirty. TAMIL TIGERS LTTE

\*\* 02.05.02 Pereira Colombia Bicycle bomb functioned ,killing 2 civilians and injuring 2 soldiers FARC

30.05.02 Arauca Colombo A RCIED was hidden on a bicycle and functioned killing a soldier and injured 6 others FARC

\*\* 19.09.02 Rivera Colombia A bicycle bomb killed 7 people including 4 policeman and a young boy FARC

04.08.04 Afghan Logar Province A number of children were killed as a bicycle bomb exploded as their vehicle drove past. TALEBAN (The Global Terrorism data base puts the number at 3 and reports that the explosive was attached to the bicycle - <http://209.232.239.37/gtd2/ViewIncident.aspx?id=76880> .

25.11.04 Baluchistan Pakistan A remote control bomb fixed to a bicycle killed 1 man and injured 15 other people UNKNOWN

\*\* 28.03.05 Al –Hillah Iraqi 5 Iraqis, including 3 policeman were killed and 2 others were wounded in a suicide attack in which a booby trapped bicycle was used. The explosion targeted a funeral procession in the city UNKNOWN

28.04.05 Cali Colombia A bicycle bomb left 5 people injured and damaged three buses in a residential area . UNKNOWN

30.05.05 Kabul Afghanistan A remote control bomb attached to a parked bicycle exploded wounding 4 soldiers in a taxi from the NATO led peace keeping force UNKNOWN

\* 25.09.05 South Baghdad A bomb concealed in a bicycle exploded in a market, killing 6 people and injuring 17 UNKNOWN

\*\* 25.09.05 Babil Baghdad One person was killed and 48 injured after a bicycle bomb exploded UNKNOWN

26.01.06 Central Baghdad A bicycle bomb exploded beside a police vehicle wounding 3 police officers UNKNOWN

26.01.06 Tahrir Central Baghdad A booby trapped bike exploded as a police vehicle was passing. Injuring 2 policemen and a civilian. UNKNOWN

30.05.06 Lycabbetus Central Athens Greece A device explode which had been placed on a bicycle that had been parked between two parked vehicles. The explosives were estimated at 1.5 kilos of high explosive. UNKNOWN

\*\* 23.06.06 Alaawi Baghdad 2 people were killed and eight others were injured when a bike bomb explode near the Baghdad Cinema in Alaawi UNKNOWN

\*\* 27.06.06 Shiite Village Baquba Iraqi 22 Iraqis, including children were killed when a bike bomb exploded in a market square where villages were watching a World Cup football match between Italy and Australia. UNKNOWN

\*\* 29.10.06 Quetta Pakistan A bicycle bomb exploded outside a police barracks killing 1 and injuring 12 others. NATIONALIST BALOCH REBELS

04.11.06 Suwayra Baghdad A bicycle bomb explode in a crowded market UNKNOWN

14.11.06 Quetta Pakistan A bomb attached to a bicycle exploded killing 2 and injuring 15 others. The device was detonated by a timing device. UNKNOWN

13.05.07 Izmir Port Turkey A homemade bomb left on a bicycle exploded at a market in the Turkish port city of Izmir killing 1 person and injuring 14 UNKNOWN

\* 22.05.08 Kandahar Afghanistan A bicycle packed with explosives killed one soldier of the Afghan National Army & wounded another. It appears to have been detonated by remote control

06.06.08 Dera Ismail Khan Pakistan 5 people including 3 policemen were killed when a bomb apparently targeting a police party exploded in northwestern Pakistan. Remote controlled device planted on a bicycle.

## Comment

\* There are three reports totaling 10 fatalities which refer to bombs IN bicycles or a bicycle packed with explosives. None in the UK.

\*\* There are a further 8 reports totaling 41 casualties in which it is not clear whether the bomb was in the bicycle or on it. None in the UK.

\*\*\* This report refers to a “bicycle packed with explosives”, suggesting that the explosives were contained within the frame or tires. But a BBC report states that the bomb was in the basket of the bicycle -

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/countdown\\_390828\\_mon\\_05.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwtwo/countdown_390828_mon_05.shtml)

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Given the difficulty of the task of filling the frame or tires with explosives, and the limit it places on the quantity of explosives that can be used, it appears possible that none of the fatal explosions reported above were caused by explosives contained within bicycles. Because of the high risk of theft, a bicycle parked with panniers attached would arouse suspicion and could be treated like any other suspicious package abandoned in a public place.

The numbers of fatalities caused by bicycle bombs in the list above, ranging from 0 to a possible maximum of 51 WORLDWIDE, reported since 1939, merit a context. Last year alone, worldwide, more than 50 million people died of all causes, and more than 550,000 in the UK. In compiling lists of things to worry about it is difficult to think of anything that might rank below bicycle bombs – perhaps playing conkers without goggles?

The actuarial risk of anyone, anywhere in the world being killed by a bomb packed within the frame or tires of a bicycle is vanishingly small. There are many other easier and more effective ways of causing mass mayhem. Yet this is the risk used to justify the edict forbidding the parking of bicycles in selected parts of Westminster.

The edict causes significant inconvenience to thousands of cyclists. The current Government claims to seek to encourage cycling, and the leader of the opposition,

perhaps the next prime minister, on well-publicized occasions cycles to work, but enjoys privileged cycle parking. Anyone wishing to cycle to meet him in the House of Commons will have to park it a long way away.

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## Further Evidence

Seeking evidence beyond the above list assembled by Lorraine and Adam I found, with the help of Google, [a report in \*The Telegraph\* of Calcutta](#) about a bicycle in Assam that had been converted into a bomb. The paper reported it as a world first.

“Unlike the so-called “bicycle bombs” recently used in India and Afghanistan, Baishya’s two-wheeler hadn’t been fitted out with a bomb but converted into one, catapulting the Assam rebel group into the league of the Irish Republican Army and al Qaida as improvisers of the terrorist arsenal.”

Tracing the history of vehicles converted into bombs it says

“The idea developed into the car bomb, truck bomb and perhaps the “aircraft bombs” used by Osama bin Laden on September 11, 2001. But the true bike bomb stayed elusive, although the IRA launched the bike-strapped-with-bomb variety in Coventry in August 1939.”

The only report of bicycle-bomb related damage that I have been able to discover is a case of damage to a bicycle, not damage caused by a bicycle. There is apparently a Florida rock band called *This Bike is a Pipe Bomb*. According to [a report in \*Washington Week\*](#) a sticker advertising the band was affixed to a bicycle on the Ohio University campus. It was discovered by the Ohio U campus police and “disassembled” by the Columbus bomb squad. The Report stated that at the time of writing the University was discussing financial compensation with the owner of the disassembled bicycle.

These two reports highlight two characteristics of the War against Terrorism, and the proposal that we should fortify our cities against it:

1. It is based on worst-case scenarios. Yes, the Indian report illustrates the possibility of converting a bicycle into a pipe bomb. But the report notes that the bomb was not detonated. So far I cannot find a single unambiguous report of explosives packed into a bicycle killing anyone. There are many clever, imaginative, inventive and resentful people all around the world plotting ways of expressing their resentment. The rarity, or non-existence, of bicycle bombs as instruments of their resentment suggests that bicycle bombs ought to be dismissed as a concern justifying freedom-restricting measures.
2. Paranoia. Both the Columbus bomb squad and whoever is responsible for banning cycle parking in Westminster manifest an irrational response to a negligible threat.

If anyone knows who issued the edict banning bicycle parking in the environs of White Hall and Parliament Square, and what justification they offered for it, I would be grateful if they would get in touch.

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