

Manchester Arena attack: Bomber Salman Abedi had links to serious crime gang in the city, MI5 officer tells inquiry

The things coming out at the Manchester Arena bombing inquiry get worse. I had difficulty choosing the most damning headline from tonight's news. From [Sky News](#), [The BBC](#) and the [Daily Mail](#)

The Manchester Arena bomber had links to a serious crime gang in the city, a senior member of MI5 has said. The officer was giving evidence from behind a screen at the Manchester Arena Inquiry, detailing intelligence received by the security service about the bomber in the years before the attack on 22 May 2017.

“Witness J” explained how MI5 came close to re-opening their investigation into Salman Abedi and a meeting was due to take place nine days after the attack. He also spoke about assessments made since the attack, which killed 22 people. He told the inquiry: “We assess that Salman Abedi was part of a group of individuals in South Manchester who had links to a serious crime gang. The challenge for us is when individuals are involved in terrorism and crime, some of their behaviour and activity can look the same...”

The officer described how a report by the Joint Analysis and Terrorism Centre (JTAC), a part of MI5, in 2010 highlighted the “close proximity between violent extremism and criminal gangs in Manchester”.

It also highlighted that individuals with a Libyan background could have been exposed to Libya-linked individuals with

extremist tendencies from their parents' generation, including members of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) which has been linked to al Qaeda. "Salman Abedi was assessed as likely his extreme views were informed by his father, Ramadan Abedi," Witness J said.

Asked by Paul Greaney QC, for the inquiry, if it was assessed that Ramadan Abedi was involved with the LIFG, he said: "I'm afraid I am not able to go into that in open [hearings]."

Sir John Saunders, the inquiry chairman, has ruled that there is "centrally important material" relevant to the question of whether MI5 could have prevented the attacks that cannot be revealed to the public. As a result, for the first time in an inquest or inquiry since 9/11, some of the hearings will take place behind closed doors.

The inquiry is examining whether a probe into Salman should have been re-opened as a subject of interest in 2016, prior to the atrocity. As part of the inquiry officials have been attempting to obtain evidence from friends and family members about Salman's background and how he came to be radicalised.

The hearing had earlier heard how Salman's brother, Ismail Abedi, had fled the country after being served a notice demanding he attend the inquiry. He said he would only help the inquiry if he was given immunity from prosecution – a request that was rejected. Their brother, Hashem, has been jailed for life for helping Salman carry out the 2017 attack.

Salman was in touch, directly and indirectly, with six different 'subjects of interest' in the years before the attack, officer said. . . individuals were said to have had a radicalising influence on Abedi but are not thought to have known about his attack plans.

Mr Greaney told the inquiry that 'the security service's general assessment on the intelligence picture as it stands is that no one other than Salman Abedi and Hashem Abedi', his

brother serving life in jail for helping building the bomb, 'were knowingly involved in the attack plot.'

Witness J conceded it was a mistake not to ask police to stop and question Abedi on his return to the UK on 18 May. The bomber immediately took a taxi to a store of explosives and set about making his final attack preparations.

Asked by Mr Greaney if it had been a missed opportunity, Witness J said stopping him "would have been the better course of action".

Inquiry chairman Sir John Saunders said MI5 had known Abedi was in contact with terrorist suspects and his father had been involved in such activities in Libya, adding that he looked like an "obvious candidate" to be involved in terrorism himself.

Sir John asked Witness J about why Salman Abedi had not been referred to the [Prevent counter-extremism scheme](#) when he was closed as a subject of interest in July 2014. The witness said consideration of a Prevent referral was not "policy" at the time and that it was a "reasonable" decision not to refer Abedi.

Sir John said it was a government de-radicalisation scheme and "MI5 didn't take advantage of it".

The inquiry continues.