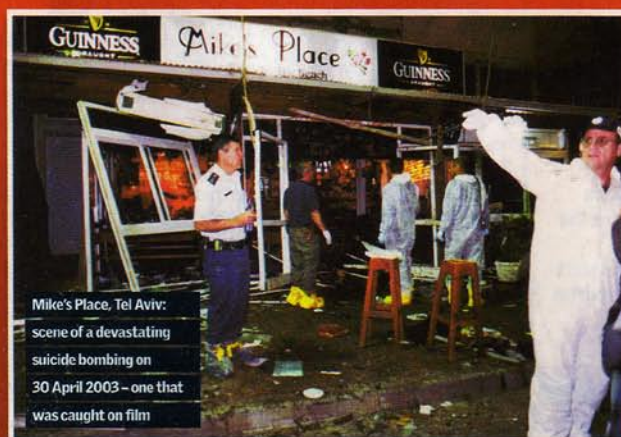


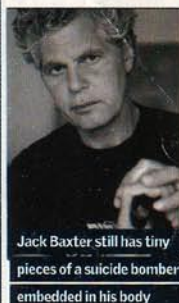
# 'I FILMED A SUICIDE BOMBER AND LIVED'

On 7 July 2005, Mohammad Sidique Khan masterminded the worst terrorist attack in UK history. Meet American Jack Baxter, a documentary filmmaker who crossed paths with Khan two years ago and lived to tell the tale. Only problem: nobody listened

WORDS CHRIS DINARDO



Mike's Place, Tel Aviv:  
scene of a devastating  
suicide bombing on  
30 April 2003 – one that  
was caught on film



Jack Baxter still has tiny  
pieces of a suicide bomber  
embedded in his body

**IN APRIL OF 2003**, Jack Baxter had the honour of being inducted into just about the most exclusive club there is.

'I'd actually talked about it to Avi, the security guy at the door,' Baxter recalls. 'You know: "what if...?"' So when it happened, we had this half-second of realisation where our eyes met, and we both just thought, "Wow, this is it."

Standing at the open front of a beach bar in Tel Aviv, Israel, live blues mixing with the ocean air, Baxter and the security guard barely

noticed the short figure in a too-heavy jacket striding towards them. So when the man stopped, smiled widely, and said, 'Allahu akbar', there was just time for just one quick shove from the guard, propelling the guy a few crucial steps back outside, before it happened.

Hello, Jack – welcome to the 'I Survived A Suicide Bomb From Four Feet Away' club. He's still amazed. 'The bomber's own body is what shielded me,' Baxter says today. 'See, he had the explosives strapped to his back. For some reason, the blast shot him straight

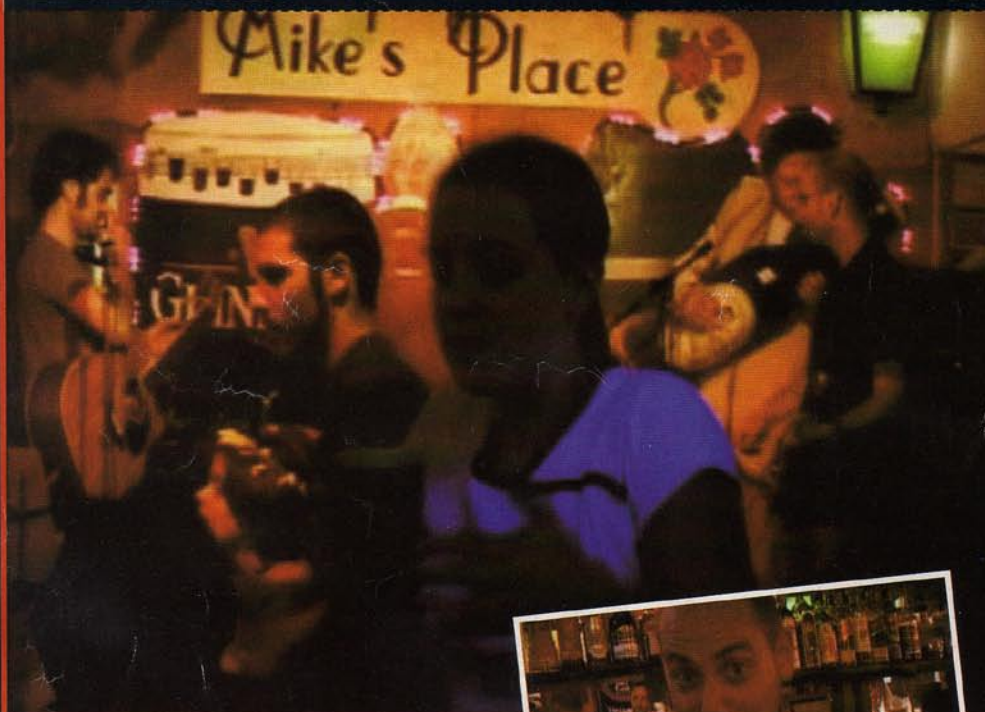
upwards. His torso lodged in the bar's canopy and just hung there. The rest of him was all over the place. And all over me.'

There were three dead and many badly injured (including Baxter). But the quick action of the doorman had prevented what would have been dozens from being killed inside the packed club. It was, on the twisted scale of these sorts of things, something of a failure as a suicide bombing.

Back in Britain, chances are that mild-mannered schoolteacher Mohammad



## >BEFORE THE EXPLOSION



### DOCUMENTED ON FILM:

**Left:** Mike's Bar was a popular live music venue, renowned in Tel Aviv for its blues nights. **Above, top:** Avi, the bouncer, had previously worked as a doorman in Miami. He shoved the suicide bomber away from

the customers crucial seconds before detonation. He was seriously injured. **Above:** French waitress Dominique whose arm was severed in the attack. She bled to death in the bar.



Cameraman Joshua, whose quick thinking saved Baxter's film

► Sidique Khan was feeling some disappointment. That's because the bombing team in Tel Aviv were his associates – and analysts from Mossad to the FBI believe that Khan orchestrated the entire affair, as an induction to his career in terrorism. It was a career that would lead directly to 52 deaths in London's morning rush hour two years later.

Half-paralysed in his hospital bed, Jack Baxter was visited by representatives from Israeli intelligence and the US State Department. The FBI advised it would be 'a British investigation'. But, says Baxter, the British investigators never turned up.

Given that, and all that was about to start happening, today Baxter has a question of his own regarding Khan:

'How the hell did they miss this guy?'

### >THE TARGET: MIKE'S PLACE

**THE STORY OF** how the 52-year-old Baxter came to be present at Khan's terrorist inauguration is complex. A straight-shooting arty type, Baxter's 20-a-day rasp and Bronx-Irish upbringing mask his spiritual past; he actually spent seven years of young adulthood 'panhandling for Jesus' all over the American west. 'I was a true believer,' he recalls. 'But I finally wised up, and escaped out a window

one night.' He then made his way back to New York, where he worked as everything from a bouncer at the fabled Studio 54 to a motion-picture assistant (Baxter's father co-produced the George Romero zombie classic *Dawn Of The Dead*).

Eventually producing television shows and films of his own, Jack was between projects when 9/11 happened. Living through the terrorist attacks on his hometown, he found himself fixated on the idea of a film involving 'the roots of all this: Israel'. In April 2003, with no crew, one camera and \$2,000, he left for Tel Aviv on what he concedes was 'a hopeful whim, and not much else'.

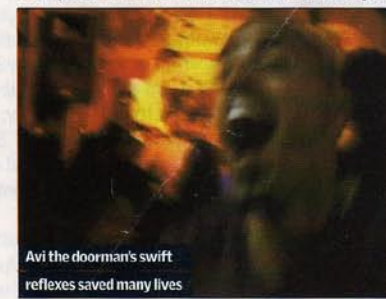
Not much else is what he got. Once in Israel, none of Baxter's contacts came through for him, and he found the place overrun with journalists. After two weeks, with funds running low, he decided to bail out. He booked his flight home, then took a last night walk along the beach...

**MIKE'S PLACE IS** unique in Israel, and perhaps the entire region. Facing the Mediterranean with a wide-open façade, it feels more like Brighton than the Middle East. European tourists, young Israelis, Yanks from the American embassy next door and Arabs all gather for booze and burgers while musicians crank out surprisingly authentic blues.

Wandering into the bar that night, Baxter immediately caught what he calls 'the joint's vibe'. The place has a timeless aura to it. Baxter decided he'd found his film.

In the weeks that followed he hung around the bar, interviewing a cross-section of the Mike's Place set while capturing a snapshot of what he calls 'the best of the Middle East': there was Dominique, the beautiful Parisian waitress; British bartender 'UK' Dave, who spoke English and Hebrew with a London accent; locals, stoners and expats from all over the world. A bartender called Joshua had cameraman experience, so Jack promptly hired him. Word of the filming spread – from his headquarters in Ramallah, Yasser Arafat himself sent a representative for Jack to interview (the guy turned out to be a Mike's Place regular – they did the interview, then got blind drunk together). The people in the film actually look happy, and nobody talks about killing anybody.

For western media, this view of life in the Middle East as being friendly, relaxed and fun was practically unprecedented. So after two more weeks of shooting, an excited Baxter decided to head home to New York to meet with potential investors. As he made his way ►



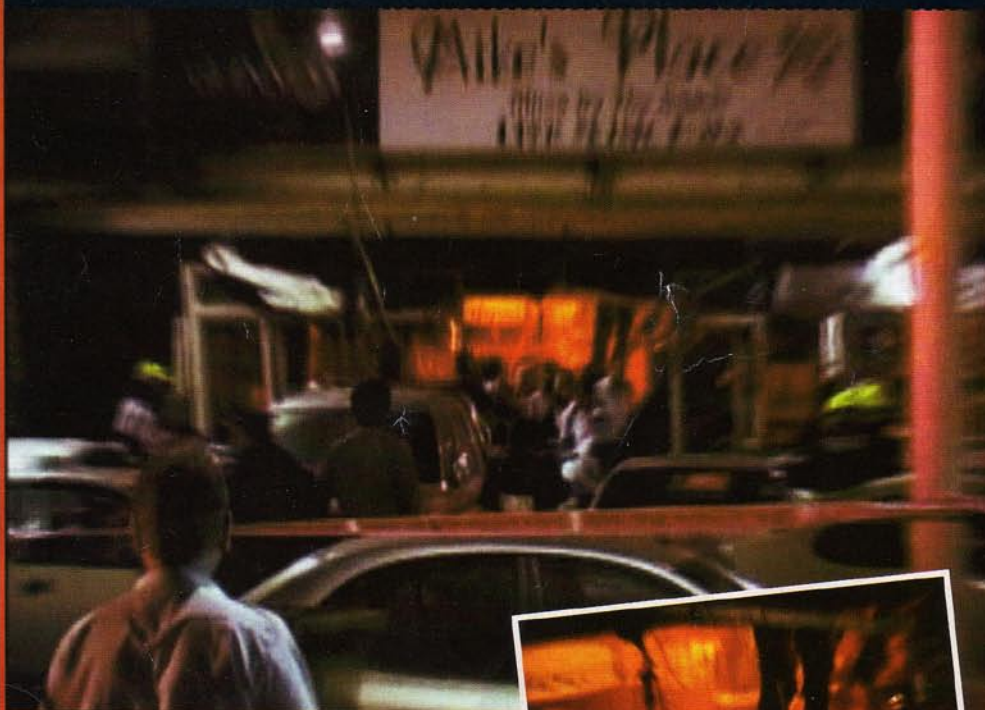
Avi the doorman's swift reflexes saved many lives

**The detonation blew Baxter backwards through the bar's front window like a character in a cartoon**



# SUICIDE BOMBING

## >AFTER THE EXPLOSION



► around the bar on his last night, giving hugs to people who'd been strangers to him just two weeks earlier, then stopping to chat with the doorman, he couldn't help feeling vindicated. His 'hopeful whim' had struck gold.

According to a musician who was on stage at the time, the detonation blew Baxter backwards through the bar's front window like a character in a cartoon. He landed roughly 30 feet into the room's interior, unconscious. At the front, bodies were splayed awkwardly about, a red wash over everything. There was screaming, and the smell of singed hair. Dominique was cradled in the arms of the bar's owner, holding a resigned smile as she watched herself bleed to death from a severed arm. Some of the bodies stayed motionless; others began to writhe. Many were on fire. Above it all, half the bomber dangled from the canopy. Those fleeing the scene were forced to run directly beneath him in order to get out, slipping in the bomber's entrails as they did. Clearly, it was now a very different type of film.

**BAXTER AWOKES** in the hospital three days later with a brain contusion, serious burns and nerve damage along his entire left side. But he



The attack claimed three lives. More than 50 were injured



The blast wedged half the bomber to the bar's ceiling – his dangling trousers are visible in silhouette

was alive. 'That was the first time I was ever thrown into a bar,' he laughs. 'Man, was I lucky.' Then he got another lucky break: following the blast, with the smoke still in the air and Baxter still unconscious, an alert Joshua had grabbed the camera and started filming. The footage was stunning – a brutal 'before and after' of a suicide attack, captured from the inside. Joshua's news buoyed the injured Baxter. The film would go on.

But then things began to go strange. 'This is what I still don't get,' Baxter says. No terrorist group claimed responsibility for the bombing, which was almost unprecedented. While the ongoing *intifada* (the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation) had made Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel seem common, the attack on Mike's Place made worldwide news because it broke the mold. There had been two bombers rather than a lone assailant (the second had fled after failing to detonate his backpack). Also, the bombers weren't Palestinians at all, but Brits – England's first suicide bombers. They even left their passports at the scene to confirm it.

'The matter is being taken very seriously indeed at the highest levels, from ministers down,' the British ambassador told the media.

Not according to Jack Baxter. 'Nobody came to talk to me,' he recalls. 'The US State Department just came by to see that I was OK



### THE CLEAN-UP

Whenever there's a bombing in Israel, a special search-and-rescue squad known as the ZAKA are called in. It's their job to gather every last piece of human flesh, which has to be buried according to strict Hebrew law. After

they'd scoured Mike's Place, they also rifled through the rubbish of a nearby burger joint where a victim of the blast had gone to clean up. During Mike's Place's rebuilding, the ZAKA were called back several times, as human remains kept being found amid the debris.

– more a social call. While I was unconscious, the FBI told my wife that the British had the investigation, because the bombers were English. Except for the Israeli guy, that was it.'

A single Israeli secret-service type had finally arrived to ask Jack if he'd 'seen anything unusual' before the attacks. Lying in his hospital bed, Jack told him he'd been stared down by a few hard-eyed Arabs outside Mike's Place the day before the bombing – guys he'd never seen before. The Israeli nodded, made some notes, and left. Baxter never heard from him again.

Or anybody else. 'I don't understand it,' he says today. 'We had all this film leading up to the bombing, film of the street, inside the bar – everything. I'd been hanging around the place for two weeks. And you know, word had gotten around. But nobody seemed to care.'

It would take two more years and 52 dead before anybody would.

### >THE LONDON 7/7 LINK

**MOHAMMAD SIDIQUE KHAN** must have rarely slept. Married straight after university, with an eight-month-old daughter and another child on the way, the 30-year-old Khan worked as a teaching assistant at a Leeds primary school. Parents and superiors declared Khan was 'brilliant' with the children who 'loved him'. He also founded and ran local gyms for boys in his Dewsbury community, a centre paid for by a £4,000 EU grant he'd helped secure. All these efforts even earned him a guided tour of Parliament from his local MPs.

Then there was his other life – the one he'd also begun straight after university: deepening commitment to Islam, attendance at Britain's most notorious mosques and a separate social circle comprised exclusively of militants. ►



► Part of this circle was a father of two from Derby named Omar Khan Sharif, and a rotund London suburbanite named Asif Hanif. Both were from solid middle-class families of Pakistani descent. Sharif was public-school educated, a bit of a rebel; Hanif was a gentle giant nicknamed 'Huggy Bear'. Khan grew particularly close to Omar Khan Sharif, as they shared a Leeds upbringing and often attended services together in Beeston. All three frequented the notorious Finsbury Park mosque, where the 'shoebomber', Richard Reid, had also been a regular.

As part of this separate life, Khan began to travel, too, all over the Middle East, keeping up a remarkable itinerary for a humble teaching assistant. In February of 2003, he made his only trip to Israel. He visited Tel Aviv – for a single day.

## NETWORK OF TERROR

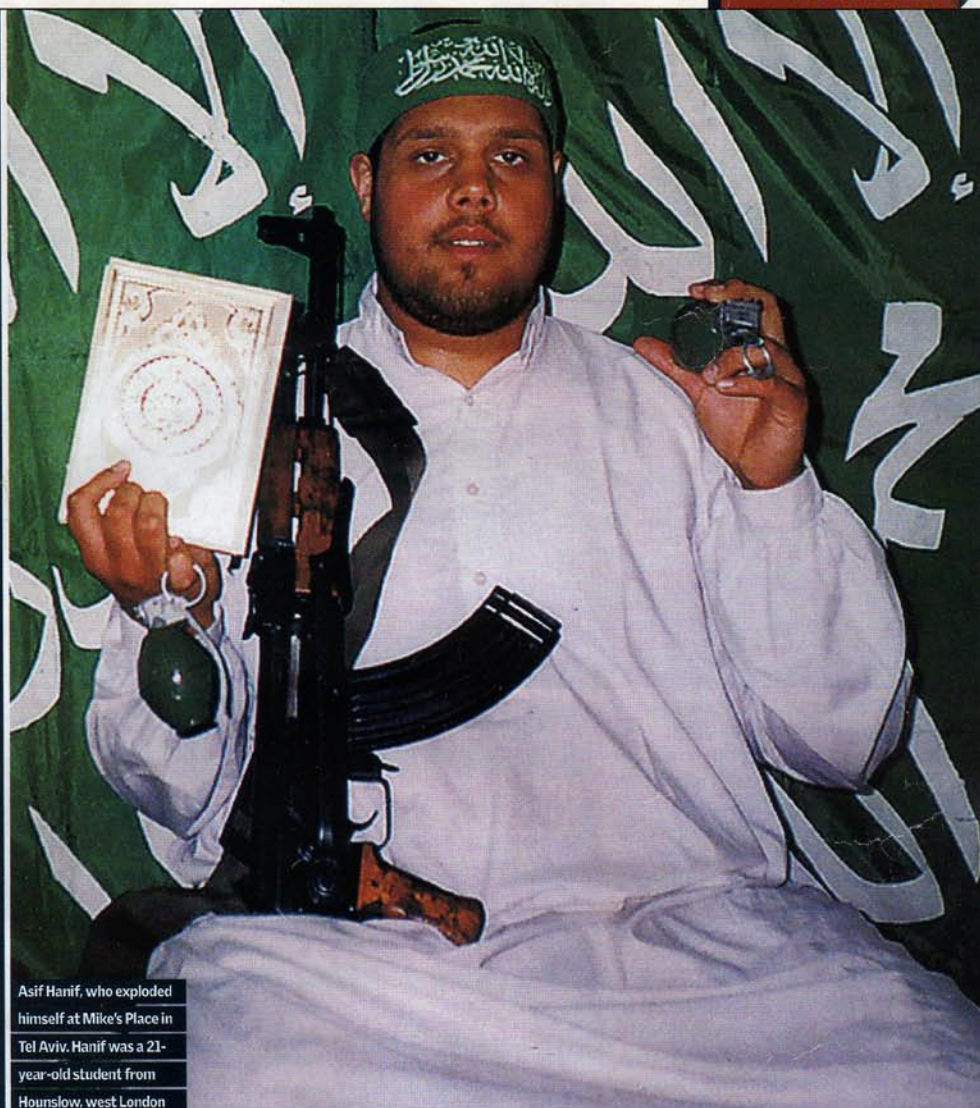
**SIX WEEKS** later, Khan's friends, Omar Khan Sharif and Asif Hanif, slip into Israel from the West Bank. Entry for them is easy; they are both carrying British passports. They are also carrying sophisticated explosives in hollowed-out copies of the Koran.

After spending some time in Gaza, the men head to Tel Aviv, where they visit Mike's Place. They sit outside on the balmy night, drink Stellas and flirt with Dominique in their British accents. They tip her very well, smiling as they leave. Fifteen minutes later, they return, still smiling; only this time, 'Huggy Bear' Hanif explodes. Omar Khan Sharif, spooked by his friend's obliteration or a technical malfunction, flees without triggering his bomb vest – he leaves it at the scene. Ten days later he's found dead in the ocean off Tel Aviv, apparently the victim of his displeased handlers.

As the world's press reacts to Britain's first suicide bombers, and funerals are arranged for the three dead victims, Khan and his fellow British Islamists suddenly find themselves the subject of... nothing. No doubt emboldened, Khan gets very busy.

In early 2004, eight British-born Pakistanis are arrested near Heathrow Airport for a plot to bomb a crowded Soho nightclub. Six hundred kilograms of ammonium nitrate fertilizer are confiscated – a favourite bomb material of terrorist groups. Khan is observed by authorities visiting one of the men linked to the plot; French authorities confirm that Khan 'had contacts' with the plotters. British authorities deny it.

**Above it all, half the bomber dangled from the canopy. Those fleeing the scene had to run beneath him, slipping on the bomber's entrails**



Asif Hanif, who exploded himself at Mike's Place in Tel Aviv. Hanif was a 21-year-old student from Hounslow, west London



**JACK BAXTER**  
Co-Director of Film

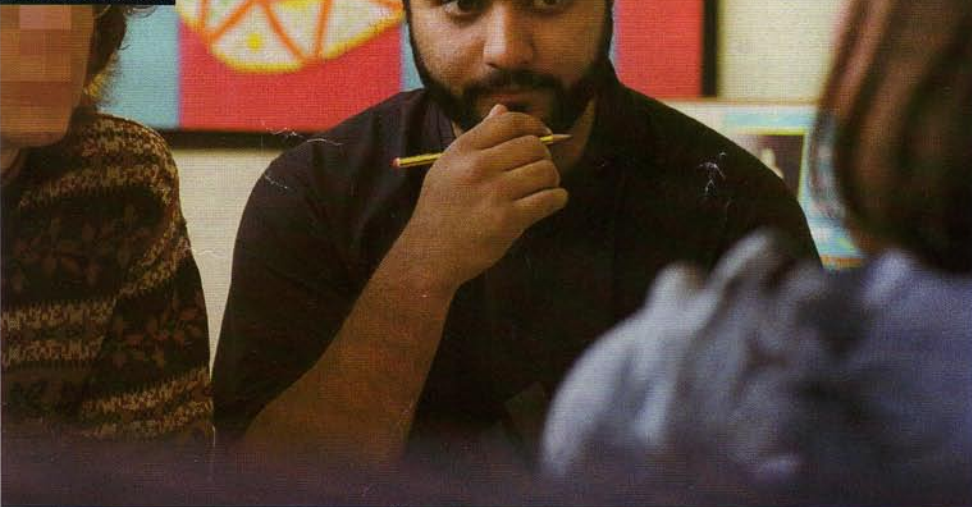


Omar Khan Sharif (left), was from Derby. Sharif fled the scene after failing to detonate his bomb belt. His body was found in the sea two weeks later



# SUICIDE BOMBING

Mohammad Sidique Khan, orchestrator of the 7 July bombings. Before his death he worked as a 'learning mentor' at a Dewsbury primary school



► A few months after that, in July, an alleged high-ranking al-Qaeda operative named Muhammad Noor Khan is arrested in Pakistan in a joint British-Pakistani operation. On Noor's computer, investigators discover plans to bomb British travel networks. Noor's principal overseas contacts are with a 'sleeper cell' in Luton. Thirteen members of this cell are arrested, but five are released; according to foreign media, Mohammad Sidique Khan was in close contact with this group too.

In November, admitted al-Qaeda member Mohammed Junaid Babar is arrested in the US for plotting to blow up British travel networks. Babar later identifies Khan as a man he met in an Afghan terrorist training camp – in fact, he says, Mohammad Sidique Khan is the man who took him to the camp, making Khan an al-Qaeda member himself.

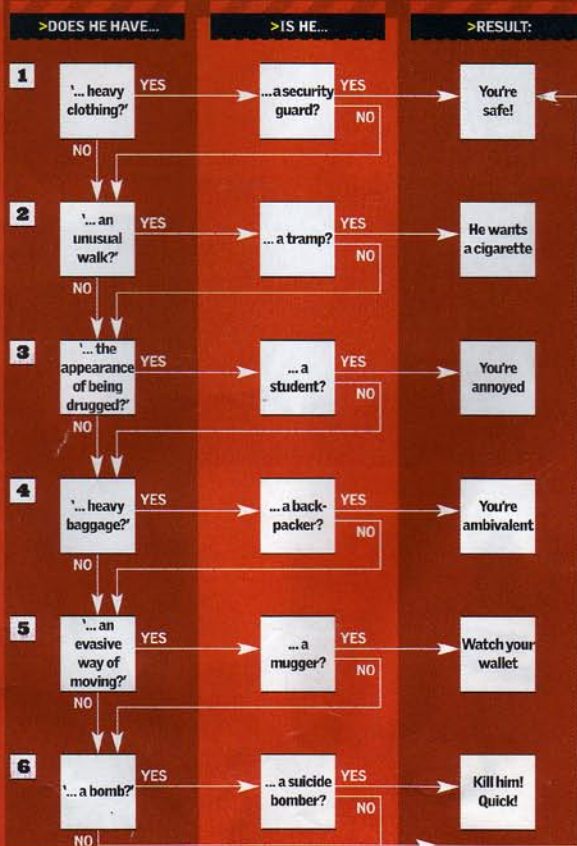
As 2004 becomes 2005, Khan begins to recruit new cell members – from the EU-funded gyms he's opened. He and future 7/7 bomber Shehzad Tanweer then travel to Pakistan, where they meet with yet another British-Pakistani later found with plans to bomb British travel networks. This man's best

**'I don't understand it. We had all this film leading up to the bombing, film of the street outside the bar – everything... But nobody seemed to care'**

## >RECOGNITION

### HOW TO SPOT A SUICIDE BOMBER (OR MAYBE NOT)

The Israeli authorities have issued a behavioural profile of a 'suicide bomber'. Trouble is, it could be absolutely anyone. In fact, looking at this, your best bet is to stay at home and avoid all contact with human beings



## PICTURES AL JAZEERA



Khan's notorious video declared war on the west

friend back in England? 'Huggy Bear' Hanif, the Mike's Place bomber.

'You think the Brits should've looked into the Mike's Place crew a bit?' asks Jack Baxter today, who's followed developments in England closely. 'Mike's really seems to have started it all over there.'

Finally, on 7 July 2005, Khan puts all his work and training to the test. Linking up in Luton, he and three accomplices he'd recruited and trained travel to London and blow themselves up at Edgware Road, Aldgate East, Russell Square and Tavistock Square.

Khan, however, hadn't fooled everyone. It soon emerged that, in the period before 7/7, he had attempted to open his own religious school in Leeds, but local Muslims blocked it to keep him from turning local kids into jihadists. 'People around here are afraid to say what they really thought of him,' says one. 'The truth is, people suspected he was up to no good.' Neighbours and even a local-government official went so far as to call the police, citing Khan's efforts to 'radicalise' local youth.

British intelligence, however, felt otherwise. In the wake of the London bombings, MI5 pronounced Khan a 'clean-skin', with no known terrorist affiliations.

## DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

**'BLUES BY THE BEACH'**, the film that tells the Mike's Place story, produced by Jack Baxter and directed by Joshua Faudem, recently completed a week's run at LA's Laemmle Grand Theater, thus qualifying it as an entry for the 2005 Academy Awards. Hollywood director David Mamet – maker of *The Untouchables* and *Wag The Dog* – calls it, 'a very important film... an undeniable presentation of the horror of terrorism'.

Today Jack Baxter still suffers from nerve damage and hearing loss, and walks with a pronounced limp. He also retains a significant amount of 'organic shrapnel'. Bits of Asif Hanif, some microscopic, some as large as a marble, are still embedded in Jack's body. Some of these are encysted and will remain, others are occasionally expelled, emerging from his musculature. 'I'm carrying this guy around with me,' Baxter says. 'I'm still trying to get rid of him.'

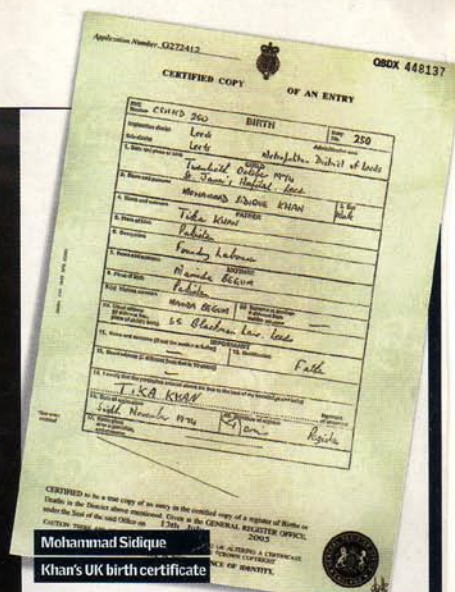
Unable to work due to his injuries, Baxter's entire life for the last two years has gone into completing the film. 'Yeah, I'm broke and broken,' he laughs. 'But I don't care. That film had to be made.' As a victim of an Israeli terrorist attack, he's supposed to receive a lifetime pension from the Israeli government, but it rarely arrives. 'Only when my wife calls ►



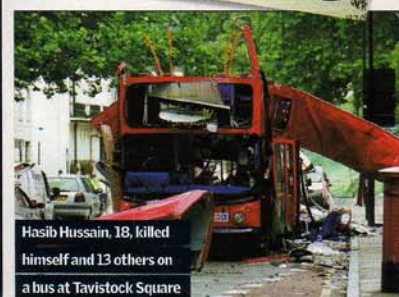
# SUICIDE BOMBING



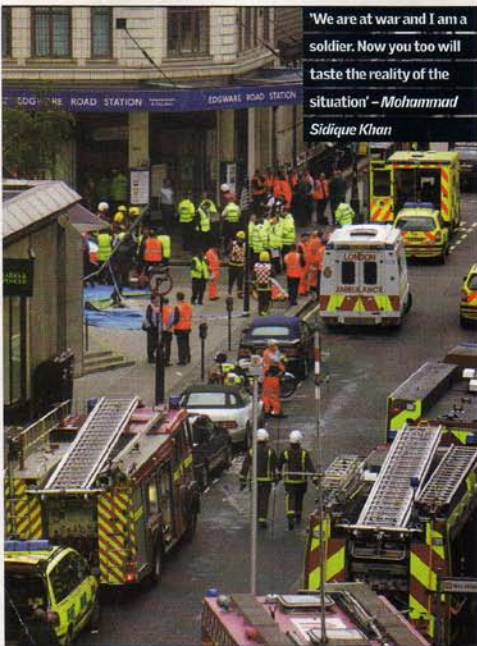
The Edgware Road attack was caught on camera phone by Frenchman Nicolas Thioulouse



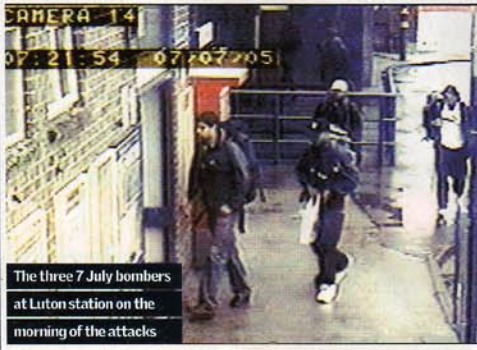
Mohammad Sidique Khan's UK birth certificate



Hasib Hussain, 18, killed himself and 13 others on a bus at Tavistock Square



'We are at war and I am a soldier. Now you too will taste the reality of the situation' - Mohammad Sidique Khan



The three 7 July bombers at Luton station on the morning of the attacks

► and bugs them, they'll send \$250 or so,' he says. 'But they did pay my medical bills.' As for Khan, the chances are, British authorities will never get to the bottom of his involvement in the Mike's Place bombing. Meanwhile it is fully expected that terrorist attacks on Britain will continue – due to the dissolution of something called the 'Covenant of Security'. The 'Covenant' is perhaps the ultimate devil's handshake; it's a declaration made by Islamic radicals that they will not carry out attacks on British soil – as long as British authorities leave them alone. It means that the UK should be safe despite attacks elsewhere. Here's Sheikh Omar Bakri Muhammad, Britain's most prominent Islamist cleric, speaking in 2004: 'The Covenant of Security makes it unlikely that British-based Muslims will carry out operations in the UK itself.' Other British Islamists have respected the Covenant; it's partly the reason foreign intelligence services before 7/7 routinely referred to London as 'Londonistan'.

In January 2005, Omar Bakri Muhammad

declared that the Covenant had been revoked, vowing Muslims would give the British 'a 9/11 day after day after day'. Six months later came 7/7. Two of Omar Bakri Muhammad's star pupils were Asif Hanif and Omar Sharif – the Mike's Place bombers.

In mid-2004, in what must be an all-time metaphor for treating a haemorrhage with an Elastoplast, three of Omar Sharif's family members were prosecuted at the Old Bailey for having prior knowledge of his mission to bomb Mike's Place. Predictably, Sharif's wife was cleared of all charges, while a mistrial was declared for his sister and brother.

This dismayed Jack Baxter even more. 'I never heard from the prosecutors on that case, either,' he tells *Maxim*. 'I have footage of the bombing, for Christ's sake. Talk about putting a face on the victims.' British prosecutors have scheduled a retrial. Jack still holds out hope that he'll be contacted.

There are those who feel that Mohammad Sidique Khan is not really dead, that he was too big a fish to be sacrificed for the cause. While it's true that Khan's ID was found at three of the four London bomb locations, and police have never confirmed a DNA match for his body, Jack Baxter remains sceptical.

'Nah, he's dead,' Baxter says. 'You've got to understand the mentality of the true believer.'

Given that – and all he's been through – is there anything Baxter would say to Britain's 'true believers'?

Lighting a cigarette with the hand that still works, Baxter considers it for a moment. 'Get out, man. Get out while you can,' he says. 'It's up to you to save yourself; they're not going to help you. Because no matter what the Mohammad Sidique Khans of the world say – the maker of the universe is not a monster.'

**Bits of the bomber are still embedded in Jack's body... 'I'm carrying this guy around with me,' Baxter says. 'I'm still trying to get rid of him'**