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Use of mobile helped police keep tabs on suspect and brother

By Mark Odell, Telecoms Correspondent
Published: August 2 2005 03:00 | Last updated: August 2 2005 03:00

The arrest of Hamdi Adus Issac, who goes by the name of Hussain Osman, is the latest in a long line of police investigations helped by the suspect's use of a mobile telephone.

Italian police revealed yesterday that the initial tip that allowed them to track Mr Issac's cell phone came from their British counterparts.

On July 26, the UK authorities notified those in Italy that a suspect going by the name of Hussain Osman had left the UK.

The next day the cell telephone that British police had linked to the suspect was switched to the Italian telephone system. On July 28, police discovered the destination of Mr Issac and his brother was put under surveillance in Rome.

Once police or the security services know the mobile phone number of a suspect, they can ask the mobile operator to track the individual.

As long as the handset is switched on the telephone can be tracked across any mobile network in real time.

By using no more than three mobile telephone masts or base stations - a process known as triangulation - it is possible to pin down the location of an individual in high density urban areas to between two and three metres. Crucial to this triangulation is the proximity to each other of the three base stations, but on average the standard deviation is no more than 25 metres.

If ordered to do so, mobile telephone operators can also tap any calls, but more significantly they can also remotely install a piece of software on to any handset, without the owner's knowledge, which will activate the microphone even when its owner is not making a call, giving security services the perfect bugging device. "We have inadvertently started carrying our own trackable ID card in the form of the mobile phone," said Sandra Bell, head of the homeland security department at the Royal United Services Institute.

The UK security services have used mobile telephone records to trap IRA terrorists in the past and the police have been helped in solving high-profile murders and abductions too.

The most recent high-profile Italian investigation using telephone records prior to the arrest of Mr Issac is that of Antonio Fazio, Italy's central bank governor, who is under fire over his alleged bias in handling an Italian bank take-over battle.

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