

# Britain: Police raid on mosque aimed at intimidating immigrants

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In an unprecedented operation, some 150 police officers clad in body armour and armed with battering rams and ladders stormed a north London mosque in the early hours of Monday, January 20. Armed police surrounded the outside of the building and several streets nearby were cordoned off as police battered their way in to the mosque in Finsbury Park. The police continued to occupy the mosque for four days.

Police claim to have recovered a stun gun and CS gas hidden in another part of the building but worshippers at the mosque have accused police of planting evidence.

Seven men on the premises at the time were arrested on suspicion of terrorism. Charges against three of those held under the Terrorism Act 2000 have subsequently been dropped. A 23-year old North African man has been freed, while the other two have been re-arrested on immigration matters. Four North African men remain in custody but so far only one has been charged under the Terrorism Act.

During their occupation of the building, police had pledged not to enter the prayer area in order to quell opposition to the raid amongst many Muslims. After they had left, however, their promise was shown to have been broken. Fuad Nahdi editor of the Muslim magazine *Q News* said: "If the police tell one lie, it raises questions about a lot of things and about what really was going on. It makes a bad situation even worse."

On Thursday, January 23 the mosque was handed over to its trustees who have closed it down for several weeks. It has been alleged that the trustees colluded with the police to remove the cleric and Islamic extremist, Abu Hamza who leads the Friday prayers.

The unprecedented raid follows a hysterical campaign instigated by the Labour government and the media over alleged terrorist plots in an attempt to justify its deeply unpopular preparations for war against Iraq.

Police claimed the raid on the mosque was linked to

their investigation into the discovery early in the New Year of the poison ricin in a flat in Wood Green, two miles from the Finsbury Park mosque. Ricin is a toxic material, easily produced from castor oil beans, which can be fatal when inhaled, ingested or injected. For days the newspapers ran with major scare stories that the British population was at risk of a ricin attack, even though forensic scientists said that the quantity found at the Wood Green flat was tiny.

Several Algerian refugees were arrested in response to the Wood Green find and have subsequently been charged with "possession of articles of value to a terrorist".

A series of raids across the country then followed. In Bournemouth on January 12 five men were arrested under terror laws, but later released without charge. On January 14, a police officer, PC Stephen Oake was killed during a raid on suspected terrorists in Manchester, also said to be linked to the ricin find. A North African immigrant has been charged with his murder.

PC Oake's death threw up numerous questions—not least of which was why a number of police officers sent to arrest a suspected terrorist were not wearing protective clothing. According to reports, the three men found in the Manchester flat by police had been held for over one hour when one of the men broke free and stabbed PC Oake with a knife.

Whilst none of these questions have been answered satisfactorily, the police officer's death has been utilised to push through further draconian legislation under the Terrorism Acts of 2000 and 2001 and to undermine democratic rights. It was in this climate that the police raided the mosque, claiming that it was necessitated by the threat of terror attacks and citing the reactionary outpourings of the Islamic cleric Abu Hamza.

Hamza has spoken of his admiration of Osama bin Laden and advocates the installation of Islamic states through holy wars. But with a small following of around

1,000 people in Britain (out of two million Muslims resident in the country) Hamza's influence has been exaggerated out of all proportion by the media which has devoted thousands of column inches to the man and his supporters.

Professor Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the president of the European Council for Fatwa and Research, condemned Islamist extremism but said: "this does not justify the police to desecrate the sanctity of the mosque, the house of God should not be stormed in this way. Have the police in Britain ever stormed into a church?"

Moreover, Hamza himself is well known to British security and intelligence forces and the mosque has been under 24-hour surveillance for the past five years. The police would immediately have known the likelihood of a terrorist plot emerging from the group. Hamza, supposedly the main target of the operation, was not arrested, interviewed or questioned during the raid or subsequently. Nor have the police approached him subsequently for a statement or an interview.

There is no doubt that the raid had a broader purpose—namely to intimidate the Muslim and refugee communities in Britain and isolate them. An atmosphere of mistrust and fear is being whipped up with the aim of diverting attention from the broad political and social implications of the government's international and domestic agenda.

There is widespread opposition to US/UK plans for war against Iraq and hostility is especially intense amongst Britain's Muslims. The Blair government, which is alienated from the majority of the population, is attempting to silence such opposition through media manipulation, force and repression. In the last weeks, the charity commission has written to mosques and threatened them with closure and withdrawal of funds if they allow their premises to be used for political activities and debates.



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