

Britain: Anti-terrorism sweep creates climate of fear

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Over 300 people have been arrested on terrorism charges in Britain since the September 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Of these, only three people have been convicted—and then only for membership of banned organisations. The majority of those targeted as terrorists are from Algeria, many having come to Britain to escape the bloody conflict in their homeland.

Particularly since December of last year Britain's police forces and security apparatus have launched a series of raids against Arab people suspected of involvement with an alleged Al Qaeda plot to launch a poison gas attack. Between December and March around 100 people were arrested in cities across the country. In addition, hundreds of men of Arab origin have been brought in for questioning.

The crackdown followed a government warning last year that Muslim extremists were planning a high profile attack in Britain. Anxious to stoke up an atmosphere of general alarm prior to the attack on Iraq, the Labour government and London's Metropolitan police had warned late in 2002 that terrorists with links to Al Qaeda were planning to use ricin in a gas attack on the London underground. Following this claim, nine men—all originally from Algeria—were arrested in Edinburgh and London on December 18. They were taken to a newly built high security police building in Glasgow for questioning.

The government claimed that the arrests followed a nationwide operation involving police, MI5 and intelligence from French security agencies.

Speaking after the arrests, Prime Minister Tony Blair said, "As the arrests show, this danger is present and real and with us now, and its potential is huge. What these arrests and the finding [of ricin] show is the need for us to be vigilant and alert... The British public has

long experienced the threat of terrorism."

Of the nine, six were seeking asylum, prompting howls from the media for a tightening of immigration policy. An unnamed intelligence source said at the time: "All of these men came here claiming asylum. There are, of course, many genuine cases, but our asylum system weakens our defences and makes us vulnerable to hostile regimes."

Most of the men were charged under Section 57 of the Terrorism Act, 2000, which states: "A person commits an offence if he possess an article in circumstances which give rise to a reasonable suspicion that his possession is for a purpose connected with the commission, preparation or instigation of an act of terrorism."

Hocine Ouldzaouche, one of the nine arrested, explained, "They [the police] told me that I was top of a British intelligence list of terror suspects... I'm a Muslim and totally oppose terrorism. It was racism and discrimination aimed at Muslims to back the war in Iraq. I was pulled because I was Algerian. They took my books, my photos, my computer. I was released without charge, but I still haven't been left alone. The police have turned up where I work. It makes everyone think I'm a terrorist."

He continued, "My wife was told by police that if I gave them information they'd leave me alone. They wanted her to encourage me to spy or pass on information to them."

Acting on information supposedly gathered from the December arrests, twelve men and one woman were arrested in January in Bournemouth and London. In February, police forces across Britain arrested another six men and a woman as part of the "ongoing investigation" into the purported threat of a ricin attack.

Two of those arrested in February were Ali and Karen

Serir of Glasgow. Ali, from Algeria, and his British born wife Karen were detained on suspicion of terrorism under the Terrorism Act, 2000. Karen was three months pregnant at the time and claims that she was subjected to “intense interrogation” during the 36 hours that she was detained. Neither was charged but Ali was detained at Greenock prison by immigration authorities.

Recounting the arrest, Ali expressed shock at the brutality of the police. “Police broke down my door in the middle of the night and pointed guns at me and my pregnant wife. They said they were arresting me as a terrorist. They cuffed us both and put us in white paper suits. They asked me about ricin and Al Qaeda. They said to me, ‘You’ve been arrested as you work with Al Qaeda,’ and they accused me of wanting to attack the [London] underground.”

Although he was released from prison in June, Ali still faces possible deportation to Algeria. Following his public association with Al Qaeda, he could face deadly consequences in his home country. “There is no doubt that this would put my life at risk if I returned,” he said. “The Algerian police came to my father’s village and questioned him about me.”

With no ricin found, even with the catchall definition of a terrorist offence, it has proved impossible for prosecutors to construct cases. All those arrested in December were finally released on standard bail—with the same conditions as shoplifters—in March. By June, prosecutors had abandoned any attempts to pursue the cases, although several now face deportation on immigration issues. Predictably, the collapse of the cases received minimal media attention compared to the hysteria surrounding the initial arrests.

Aamer Anwar, a lawyer specialising in high-profile cases involving race, had taken up the cases of Ali Serir and one of those arrested in Edinburgh in December. Commenting on the climate created by the anti-Arab measures Anwar said, “Asylum-seekers are panicking, thinking they will be deported. People are literally worrying about getting a knock on the door in the middle of the night. The Muslim community is in shock and feels under attack. People are being harassed, intimidated and abused.”

Anwar told the *Sunday Herald* that a number of the Algerian men have complained that the Special Branch tried to recruit them as paid spies to inform on the Arab

community. Several of those detained since December were offered money and mobile phones if they agreed to pass on information of any new arrivals from overseas into their neighbourhoods. To encourage compliance, immigrants were threatened with deportation.

Other examples of the sweeping attacks on Arabs in the name of the “war on terror” include:

* Algerian pilot Lotfi Raissi was detained in December 2001 on the basis of an FBI tip-off that he had been involved in the 9/11 attacks. After five months detention at the high security Belmarsh prison Raissi was released following a judicial ruling that there was no evidence connecting him with terrorism.

* In January this year a raid by Special Branch on a house in Manchester occupied by three Algerian men ended when, after several hours of questioning inside the house, one of the occupants fatally stabbed an officer. The incident brought howls from the right-wing press who have since routinely associated Algerian immigrants with terrorism, smuggling, and religious fanaticism.

* Also in January, 150 police raided London’s Finsbury Park mosque. Seven worshippers were arrested. One man was charged under terrorist laws.

* In March, parliament renewed the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act, 2001. Granting police powers to intern foreign nationals without charge for extended periods, the Act has been used against several people since it was rushed through parliament in the aftermath of 9/11.



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