

Britain: Media and government use Istanbul bombings to intimidate antiwar dissent

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The terror attack on the British consulate and HSBC headquarters in Istanbul, Turkey last week is being used to justify a further clamp down on democratic rights and to vilify and intimidate all those who politically opposed the war against Iraq.

Twenty-seven people were killed and 450 injured in the suicide bombings, including 10 consulate staff. The previous week at least 23 people were killed in the bombings of two synagogues in Istanbul.

In the days since, the media has been filled with gruesome images of the carnage and of bloodied survivors helped from the wreckage. Within minutes of the bombing Foreign Secretary Jack Straw had denounced them as the work of Al Qaeda. Subsequent reports have stated that the suicide bombers were two Turkish men with “links abroad” and nine people have been charged in connection with the attack for “belonging to, aiding and abetting an illegal organisation”.

Two organisations claiming allegiance to Osama bin Laden have said they were responsible for the bombings. But this has yet to be confirmed and the claims of one of the organisations are regarded as highly dubious.

Given the nature of organisations involved in similar terror attacks, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that those responsible for the Istanbul bombings could have been manipulated by western intelligence services. And the suspicious circumstances surrounding the 9/11 bombings in New York mean that the possibility that MI6 or the CIA had prior knowledge of the bombings in Turkey cannot be discounted either.

The British Foreign Office had already posted Turkey as a danger zone in the weeks prior to the latest atrocity. The Turkish government’s complicity with the US/UK invasion of Iraq has led to a series of bomb incidents in Turkey’s largest city over the last months, including explosions at McDonald’s restaurants, two previous small explosions outside HSBC branches, a hand grenade attack on the US consulate and two small explosive blasts at the visa section of the British consulate. Another bomb exploded near British consulate offices in Izmir.

Given this record some have queried why the British government had not made greater efforts to protect its staff at

the consulate in Istanbul. Many of those killed or injured were situated in temporary accommodation outside the main consulate building, making them “soft targets”.

In any event, Straw’s announcement of Al Qaeda responsibility was made in advance of any investigation because of his obvious desire to politically justify the British government’s support for the war against Iraq and the subsequent occupation of the country, which is advanced as the spearhead of the “war on terror”.

Several commentators noted that the blasts came as something of a political gift for Prime Minister Tony Blair, just at the point where his justifications for supporting the US-led “war on terror” was looking decidedly shaky.

The prime minister was in the midst of hosting a deeply unpopular state visit by US President George W. Bush, which saw around 200,000 gather on the streets of London just hours after the Istanbul explosions to protest the war on Iraq.

In Iraq, US and UK forces are stuck in a quagmire of their own making, faced with mounting popular resistance to their takeover of the country. Such is the hostility to Bush and Blair that the president’s visit was conducted behind a phalanx of thousands of police and security agents: he barely ventured out in public.

Immediately after the bombings, therefore, the government went on the offensive supported by a subservient media. Despite the lack of any concrete information on those responsible, the press rushed to proclaim the bombings as Britain’s equivalent of September 11, 2001.

As was the case in the US, the evoking of September 11 has been used to delegitimise popular dissent from government policy and disorientate and panic the public with the spectre of even greater terror attacks. Istanbul was seized on as proof that these dire warnings had not been exaggerated and to insist that all criticisms of the war against Iraq must now cease. Instead there must be unconditional support for the coalition’s occupation and the British public must be prepared to accept even greater inroads into civil liberties in order to combat terrorism.

BBC correspondent John Simpson made this most explicit in his dispatch from outside Buckingham Palace, where he was covering the mass protests against Bush’s visit.

“What happened in Turkey today at 0900 changed everything here,” Simpson wrote.

“Before 0900, the argument was whether Britain and the US were right to go into Iraq, and the after-effects of that.

“Now, the whole issue is really how you stand up to this kind of attack, what you do, what the best way on from here is.”

Simpson was not alone in declaring that the argument over the war against Iraq was effectively over. The *Times* editorialised, “The notion that the President and the Prime Minister were deliberately exaggerating the threat from terror for their political ends, never a persuasive one, has been rendered implausible. The demonstrations that had been organised against Mr Bush yesterday, far from being an expression of the collective will of the British people, looked irrelevant and naive.”

More emotively the *Sun* claimed, “As rescuers battled to save British lives, protesters in London were dancing and cheering after toppling their mock statute of President Bush. Have they no respect?”

“It was the sickest day on which to hold an anti-war demo.”

According to this spurious argument, the bombings are proof positive that the “war on terrorism”, under whose auspices the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq were organised, is wholly justified and necessary. The problem is the millions of people who reject these claims, who in so doing only aid terrorism.

This is to turn reality on its head. Nothing “changed” dramatically in Turkey at the stroke of nine as Simpson claims. Rather, the Istanbul bombings were a bloody and tragic confirmation that the Bush/Blair doctrine of pre-emptive war and colonial takeover are the most destabilising factor in the world today and are responsible for fuelling terror attacks.

In February, the US and Britain were arguing that the violation of international law to launch a military attack on Iraq was necessary to preserve world peace. Saddam Hussein’s regime possessed weapons of mass destruction that were an immediate threat to international security and could be used to support terror. Only through a pre-emptive strike could this threat be removed, they said.

These claims have been thoroughly discredited. Iraq did not possess weapons of mass destruction and even Bush has had to acknowledge that Hussein played no role in the September 11 atrocities.

Following the Istanbul bombings, however, Bush and Blair are seeking to breathe new life into old lies. They told a press conference of the world’s media that Iraq was now the centre of the battle against terrorism and that this justified their decision to tough out the occupation.

This is to tacitly admit that Iraq was not really a threat before the US-led war and has only become one since the occupation inflamed anti-imperialist sentiment. But the British media make no attempt to point out the glaring incongruities in Bush and Blair’s claims. They proceed as if their lies and their subsequent exposure, which underscore that the war was

conducted for geopolitical interests bound up with control of Middle East oil supplies, are of no consequence.

Nor is there any reference to current events in Iraq, where resistance to the US/UK occupation is being met with increasingly brutal repression by the Western forces as being a possible reason for terrorist reprisals being mounted.

More than 1,600 Iraqi civilians have been killed in violent incidents since the end of the war. And attacks on US forces are now running at up to 70 a day.

On November 23, two soldiers from the US 101st Airborne Division on patrol in Mosul were shot dead. In a separate attack a US soldier was killed in a roadside bombing near Baqouba, north of Baghdad.

Baqouba has been the site of a particularly brutal offensive by US forces aimed at suppressing opposition. Last week it was reported that US jets had begun bombing parts of Iraq in an attempt to wipe out resistance. In a footnote the *Guardian* newspaper reported that at least two 900-kilogram satellite-guided bombs were dropped near Baqouba last week, supposedly on terrorist training camps. And in another operation US forces reported arresting more than 160 people in nighttime raids.

The US has openly proclaimed its offensive as a “counterinsurgency mission”. Dubbed “Operation Ivy Cyclone 11,” its objective is to pummel the Iraqi people into submission and to intimidate the world’s people with the threat of more of the same.

It is US/UK policy that is responsible for such demoralised and reactionary attacks as the bombings in Istanbul. Government and press claims that there is no alternative but to continue the policy of colonial aggression regardless, are only preparing the way for future atrocities.

Moreover, the war against terrorism goes hand in glove with an assault on the democratic rights of working people in Britain. On Wednesday November 26, the Queen unveiled new government measures that effectively enable the imposition of dictatorial rule at a moment’s notice. Dubbed the “big bang”, the proposed Civil Contingencies Bill will enable the suspension of the Human Rights Act without a parliamentary vote, the seizure of property and a ban on “suspect gatherings”.



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