

Police strategy of “disruption”: New attack on civil liberties in Britain

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On April 19, armed police numbering 400, some wearing helmets and body armour, carried out a series of dawn raids in Greater Manchester, Rochdale, Coventry and Rotherham. The operation—code-named “Operation Zoological”—involved officers from five forces, including Scotland Yard’s anti-terrorist branch. Eight men, one woman and a 16-year-old youth were arrested, six of whom were understood to be Iraqi Kurd asylum seekers and the rest of North African origin. The 10 were held under the Anti-Terror Laws of 2000 “on suspicion of the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terror.”

In the days that followed, the press was full of claims that the police had foiled an Al Qaeda plot to carry out a terror strike on Manchester United’s Old Trafford football stadium, possibly involving suicide bombers or chemicals. The *Sun* ran a banner headline: “Manchester United bomb plot; Exclusive.” It announced the discovery of a “suicide bomb plot to kill thousands of soccer fans” and claimed that a police source had said, “The plot involved several individual bombers in separate parts of the stadium.”

The *Daily Mail* reported, “The aim was to stage a ‘spectacular’ atrocity at this weekend’s fixture between United and Liverpool, when a near-70,000 crowd will be packed into the ground.” It continued, “In addition, terrorists are only too aware that an attack on a football match would strike fear into the hearts of hundreds of thousands of other fans who attend matches every week.” The *Mail* claimed to have been told by a police source, “This would have provided Al Qaeda with a major propaganda coup. A catastrophe at a world famous sporting venue would be flashed around the world.”

Photographs of forensics officers clad in protective clothing and carrying plastic bags stuffed with “evidence” appeared in all the papers. Readers were assured that thorough searches would be conducted at the addresses of those arrested, and of their bank accounts, mobile phone records and computer hard drives. The story received worldwide coverage.

It has since emerged that the operation was a fraud. On May 2, the *Observer* newspaper carried an article headlined, “Man U bomb plot probe ends in farce.” It revealed that the sum-total of the evidence for the targeting of Old Trafford for a terror raid was a few ticket stubs for a Manchester United fixture, kept as souvenirs by Kurdish supporters, and a photograph of one of the suspects taken at a previous game—the kind of material that could be found in any football supporter’s bedroom.

The *Observer* quoted information from a “Whitehall source” that there were “serious concerns within government about the press coverage of the Old Trafford story” and that from an early stage it was thought that the suspects were “unlikely to be charged.” This was confirmed by a BBC report that stated, “From the start our security services were suggesting that these men may not be major terrorist suspects and yet the speculation continued.”

At one point, the attorney general, Lord Goldsmith, considered issuing an injunction to stop some of the newspaper stories from being published, but decided that “action would not be appropriate.”

The Greater Manchester police claimed they were very concerned about some of the press coverage, as it contained a lot of errors and they would love to know where the reporters got their information. But it is clear that the source of the information was from within the police force.

All 10 suspects were questioned for seven days, and not a shred of incriminating evidence was found. They were then quietly released without charge, with no apology from the police or retraction of the accusations made against them.

The operation was part of a recently introduced police initiative, a national anti-terrorist strategy of “disruption.” According to the *Observer*, the police claim the strategy is “designed to unsettle terror cells working within immigrant communities in Britain by carrying out sweeps of arrests *which are not necessarily designed to lead to charges*” [our emphasis].

It is clear that the purpose of this strategy of “disruption” is to spread fear and alarm amongst the immigrant community, to whip up racism and create a climate of anxiety and tension in the population at large. It flies in the face of the rule of law—with armed police arresting innocent individuals, whom they had under surveillance for weeks, searching their property, interfering with their computers, bank accounts and telephone conversations, and all without just cause.

The raid in Manchester took place at 3:30 in the morning. Neighbours heard a disturbance and cries for help from the targeted individuals. Irfaan Arif, who runs AK Computers nearby, described how he was woken by the police that morning:

“We heard lots of banging and shouting and general noise. We went to the window and there were about 10 police outside and some inside.”

His business partner, Muhammad Tahir, told the *World Socialist Web Site* how he was woken up by kicking, screaming and

shouting. “It was so real and so clear that I thought we were getting burgled ourselves. It sounded as if they were coming from upstairs. I could hear them shouting for help and stuff like that—that they were getting robbed.

“It all finished in about a minute or so, and for that minute it was really scary. I looked out of the window and saw the police outside, and I thought perhaps our shop has been attacked. I came downstairs to have a look and saw the police with full-body armour, helmeted and armed. As soon as I went downstairs they said, ‘I’m sorry this is a crime scene and you can’t come downstairs. You have to wait upstairs until we let you know.’

“There is something very wrong with their so-called intelligence. They arrested 10 people and all 10 have been released without charge. It doesn’t make sense. It is just an infringement of our civil liberties really, isn’t it? And an excuse to keep on doing it.”

On his release, one of the arrested men told *The Observer* that he was not informed of any specific terrorist charges against him and they were simply asked general questions, including what he thought about the war in Iraq. Speaking through his solicitor, Rebecca Yates, he said, “I still don’t know why I was arrested. I don’t have any involvement in a terrorist activity and I don’t practise any particular religion. I was shocked and ashamed and saddened by the feeling that the good name of the Kurdish people has been shamed by being associated with terrorism.”

Another one of those arrested, Rabaz Ali Muhammed, told the BBC that he came from Halabjah and that his parents and two brothers and two sisters were killed in the Iraqi government’s chemical attack there in 1988. He described his experience as “like no other nightmare I have ever seen before.” He said that when he was first told that he was suspected of being a terrorist, for a moment he wished that he had died too.

He explained that there was no way that he could be described as an Islamic extremist. Although he was brought up a Muslim, he is now an atheist, wears Western clothes, and likes to drink and go to nightclubs. He said, “I was kept in jail for seven to eight days and I need to have an answer as to why I was arrested.” He is considering taking legal action against the police.

A solicitor acting for one of those arrested told the *World Socialist Web Site* of the impact the raids had on the individuals concerned. “There are important questions about ‘Operation Disruption’ that need to be addressed. Innocent people, who have been involved in these sorts of exercises, are left with their lives in ruins, particularly when the story is leaked to the media, which then is broadcast right around the world.

“In this case there is a property—the Dolphin Takeaway—which was the focus of media attention. It was a successful business, but is now as good as worthless.

“Even when it is reported that suspects have been released without charge, that isn’t good enough. There is still that tarnish there. It should say they have been released without charge because there was no evidence associating them with terrorism. Unless everything is made plain, there will be suspicions.

“The takeaway has been closed since the arrests. Its owners wanted to make known how upset they were about their good name having been damaged in the Kurdish community by being associated with terrorism.

“And it’s not something that just has a local impact. The Kurdish leaders here have received phone calls from people they know from right around the world asking what was going on. It has a global impact because information travels so quickly. The damage can be done in moments. When big headlines are given to the press and they turn out to be incorrect, then the individuals concerned deserve to have that properly corrected.”

The arrests have provoked outrage in the Kurdish community in Manchester, and they are considering legal action against Manchester Police. Chairman of the local resident’s association, Hishiyar Abid, told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “We as a Kurdish people have been engaged in fighting Islamic fundamentalism in Iraq since 1994, long before September 11.

“There is a group called Ansar Al-Islam, who are supporters of Al Qaeda, which had a stronghold in the mountains near Halabjah. On February 1, they sent two suicide bombers to the headquarters of the Kurdish Democratic Party and killed our ministers and the deputy prime minister. They have also attempted to assassinate the prime minister at least twice.

“It is very ironic and surprising for us to be branded as terrorists. We feel that the whole community has been branded in this way, so people were very surprised and saddened. And that was not just confined to the Kurdish community in this country. We have had calls from everywhere in the world really, from Australia, America, Europe and from Kurdistan itself, to find out what is happening.

“Iraqi Kurds have suffered from mass extermination, mass graves and seen thousands of our villages destroyed. But even in our most desperate times, we never resorted to terrorism against innocent people. There are many right-wing people around who will capitalise on a situation like this.”

In a BBC interview, Assistant Chief Constable Dave Whetton of the Greater Manchester Police denied that the arrests were a mistake. He also denied that the police had ever said there was a plot against Old Trafford. “It’s the police service’s policy and the government’s policy that we will never ever confirm or deny any speculation against targets. But what I can say is that we have a duty, when we get intelligence, to sit down with other agencies, including the security service, to assess the risk that is posed to the public, or on occasions make some very difficult decisions about what we are going to do about it.... In this case we did take action and that action is continuing, inquiries are continuing.”

When challenged by the BBC that something was seriously wrong if all 10 people had been released without charge, he replied, “Well you have got to understand the Terrorism Act. We can arrest people under the act and then, under the Terrorism Act, we can either charge or release. We can’t put people on bail as we can with normal criminal matters. The inquiries, as I say, are still ongoing, and when they are concluded we will speak to individuals as appropriate.”



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