

The deportation of Yusuf Islam (Cat Stevens)

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24 September 2004

Once again, the Department of Homeland Security has combined tragedy and farce in an exhibition of the police-state implications of the so-called “war on terrorism.”

The events of Tuesday—when Tom Ridge’s agents in the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) ordered a flight bound for Washington to land in Maine and rock-star-turned-Muslim-philanthropist Yusuf Islam (formerly Cat Stevens) to be deported—have provided a chilling demonstration of vast and arbitrary police powers, against which the victims have no recourse.

The United Airlines flight with 249 passengers was diverted 600 miles when TSA officials discovered that Islam, who had been placed on the US government’s secret “no-fly” list in July, was on board. According to Homeland Security and TSA officials, “national security” interests demanded that the flight be shifted away from the Boston-New York-Washington corridor and Islam be hustled out of the country.

What was the basis for this extraordinary action? Homeland Security spokesman Brian Roehrkasse said, according to the September 23 *Washington Post*, “Yusuf Islam has been placed on government watch lists because of *concerns* of ties he *may have* to *potential* terrorist-related activities” (emphasis added). Ridge echoed this rationale, declaring in his typically semi-coherent manner: “Celebrity or unknown, our job is to act on information that others have given us. And in this instance, there was some relationship between the name and the terrorists’ activity with this individual’s name being on that no-fly list, and appropriate action was taken.”

US security officials refused to provide any specifics about Islam’s purported terrorist connections, or provide the source of the allegations against him. That, however, is standard practice. Any individual, whether foreign national, like British subject Islam, or American citizen, can be stripped of the right to fly on the basis of undisclosed “intelligence” supposedly linking him to “terrorist-related” activities. Once on the no-fly list, it is virtually impossible to get off.

Cat Stevens, who sold over 25 million albums in the 1960s and 1970s with such hits as “Wild World” and “Peace Train,” converted to Islam in the late 1970s and changed his name to Yusuf Islam. Since then he has helped establish and sponsor three Muslim-related charities: Small Kindness for humanitarian relief, Islamia School’s Trust for education, and Waqf al Birr Educational Trust for educational and medical research.

He has become a prominent figure in the British Muslim community, speaking out against war and championing the rights of oppressed people, especially in Islamic countries. One of his charities raises money for orphans and families affected by war in places such as Kosovo, Bosnia and Iraq.

He has on numerous occasions denounced terrorist methods. After the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington, he declared, “No right-thinking follower of Islam could possibly condone such an action.” He donated the proceeds of a boxed set of his recordings to the families of victims of the 9/11 attacks.

Just two weeks ago, on September 9, he issued a statement denouncing the terrorists who seized a school in Beslan, Russia, setting into motion a siege that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of hostages, most of them children. He wrote of the “gruesome cruelty” of using innocent children as “negotiating pawns” and denounced the “inhumane mentality” of the perpetrators. He added that “crimes against innocent bystanders taken hostage in any circumstance have no foundation whatsoever in the life of Islam.”

In 1989, he shocked and alienated many of his fans when he defended the death sentence proclaimed by Iran’s Ayatollah Khomeini against the writer Salman Rushdie, whose novel *Satanic Verses* was denounced by the mullahs as a defamation of Islam. The former rock star subsequently sought to distance himself from the barbaric death edict.

In July 2000, the Israeli government denied him entry into the country, accusing him of donating tens of thousands of dollars to Hamas. At the time, Islam issued a

statement declaring, “I want to make sure that people are aware that I’ve never ever knowingly supported terrorist groups—past, present or future.”

This history points to the likely source of at least some of the “intelligence” linking Islam to terrorist groups. The ex-singer incurred the further wrath of the US government when, last year, he released a new recording of his 1970s hit “Peace Train” to express opposition to the war in Iraq.

Unnamed US officials told the media after Islam’s detention that he had provided financial support for Muslim charities “believed to be linked” to terrorism. They refused to name the charities.

This charge has become a blanket pretext for arresting and prosecuting many prominent Muslims, both in the US and abroad. In fact, many thousands, if not millions, of Muslims donate to Islamic charities, and most of them would have no way of knowing whether the organizations were linked to terrorist groups or actions. In any event, Yusuf Islam has never been charged with a crime, and no evidence has ever been advanced linking him to terrorist-related groups.

Other facts underscore the absurd and arbitrary nature of the actions taken by the US government. Islam’s Islamia Schools is affiliated with the well-established Muslim Council of Britain. In his capacity as head of Islamia, Yusuf Islam has met with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Home Secretary David Blunkett and Prince Charles.

Notwithstanding his opposition to the war, Islam earlier this year established the Small Kindness European Management Training and Educational Center at Baghdad University. The center was formally opened March 14 at an official ceremony attended by representatives from Iraq’s Ministry of Higher Education and the president of the university. The latter sent a personal letter to Islam thanking him in behalf of the Iraqi people.

Islam’s deportation evoked angry protests from British Muslim organizations, which denounced it as “Kafkaesque” and a “slap in the face of sanity.” They noted that the exclusion of Islam followed an attempt last month by US officials to prevent a British Islamic professor from taking up a teaching post in America.

Suggesting that the US action was aimed at whipping up public hysteria and anti-Muslim prejudice, a spokesman for the Muslim Association of Britain said, “It seems that the US officials would rather that the untrue and distorted images of Islam and Muslims persist in the minds of its own citizens.”

Even British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, in New York for the UN General Assembly meetings, felt obliged

to register a protest with US Secretary of State Colin Powell. Other British officials, speaking anonymously, said British intelligence had no evidence that Islam posed any danger.

The deportation of Islam follows other recent examples of the sweeping and anti-democratic character of measures enacted in the name of airline security. Last month, Senator Edward Kennedy, the second most senior member of the US Senate, revealed that for a period of five weeks this spring he was repeatedly blocked from boarding flights, on the grounds that his name was on a no-fly list. Another prominent Democrat considered a leading liberal, Congressman John Lewis of Georgia, also reported being singled out for special scrutiny.

The law under which Islam was prevented from entering the US gives government officials virtually unchecked powers to exclude people. Authorities can bar any foreigner who they claim has used a “position of prominence” to “endorse or espouse terrorist activity, or to persuade others to support terrorist activity or a terrorist organization.”

Under conditions where the US government equates all Iraqi resistance against American occupation with terrorism, it is obvious that any person who defends the right of the Iraqi people to resist the US military and its stooge government can be barred from entering the US.

These government police powers are in the process of being extended. The 9/11 commission recommended that the government take over from the airlines the administration of watch lists, and the Transportation Security Administration has begun implementing the proposal.

In addition, the federal government announced on Tuesday, the same day as Islam’s detention, that it plans to order all commercial airlines to turn over millions of passenger records by November, so that it can begin testing a new program, called “Secure Flight.” The centerpiece of this program is a vastly expanded database for drawing up its watch and no-fly lists. There are no provisions for banned passengers to see the accusatory information or contest their proscription.



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