

Britain: Lessons of the Forest Gate anti-terror raid

By Socialist Equality Party (Britain)

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The freeing of two innocent men arrested in the June 2 police raid in Forest Gate, London underscores the dubious character of all of the claims made by the government, the police and security services in pursuit of the “war on terror.”

Some 250 police officers were mobilised for the dawn raid on the poor immigrant neighbourhood in east London. Two houses were targeted based on intelligence that they were the location for a chemical bomb factory run by two brothers, Mohammed Abdul Kahar and Abdul Koyair.

The raid was brutal. Fifty of the officers, some armed and dressed in black and wearing balaclavas, broke down the front door and ran into the house without warning those inside that they were police. Shortly afterwards, Kahar was shot in the shoulder in circumstances that remain shrouded in mystery. He was rushed to hospital and his brother was taken to Paddington Green high security police station.

Members of another family who occupied the adjoining property stated that they were physically assaulted during the raid, with one man receiving serious head injuries that required hospital treatment.

Only hours after the raid, questions began to emerge as to its conduct: Why were so many officers involved? Why had a no-fly zone been established over the area and police given protective clothing whilst no effort had been made to evacuate residents?

Twelve hours after being detained the neighbours were all released without charge.

Within 24 hours it was clear that police had found no trace of chemicals, much less the suicide belt that some claimed they had been searching for. It also transpired that the raid had been mounted based on allegations from a single source. Despite this, on June 7 the police were given permission to hold the two brothers for an additional 48 hours after the initial warrant for their detention had passed.

Following the brothers' release without charge late on Friday June 9, more evidence emerged regarding events leading up to the raid.

A number of reports have stated that the initial tip-off was a call to the anti-terror “hotline” claiming that the house was a production site for a chemical vest that, when detonated, would spray cyanide or sarin gas over a wide area. The claim is

frankly bizarre, given that an explosion would serve to destroy any chemicals present, and there is no precedent for the existence of such a device.

The most damning report was made in the *Observer* June 11, which stated that the government had insisted the raid go ahead despite Scotland Yard having warned MI5 that it had “serious reservation about the credibility” of the intelligence source.

“Whitehall sources told *The Observer* last night the reservations were passed up the chain of command to senior officials in the office of Sir Richard Mottram, the government’s security and intelligence co-ordinator, but despite the concerns the police were ordered to go in.

“It wasn’t the fact that the information was based on a single source, it was more that the police doubted the credibility of that source,’ said a Whitehall official. ‘The intelligence was doubtful. On the Thursday night [hours before the raid] there were contradictions about how strong the intelligence was.

“There came a point when officials in the Cabinet Office were made aware that the police believed they were being placed in difficulty because of the quality of this intelligence.”

The *Observer* report contained another important admission: “It has emerged that the police had only expected to find a trigger or mechanism, not all the components to make a chemical weapon. ‘It would be unique for bomb-makers to make entire bombs in a family house,’ said one person familiar with the situation.”

If this was the case, then there was no justification other than political expediency for deploying 250 officers or imposing a no-fly zone.

The government clearly believed something relatively unthreatening would be found, and wanted it to be the occasion for a high-profile and successful anti-terror raid. Not only would this vindicate the general “war on terror” rhetoric, but it would also detract from very real and growing political difficulties facing the government.

For weeks the government has been under sustained attack by the media, claiming that the Home Office is soft on law and order, especially foreign nationals convicted of criminal offences. The Home Office was keen to demonstrate its effectiveness. Only days before the Forest Gate operation, newly appointed Home Secretary John Reid took part in an

immigration raid in London, dressed in a Kevlar jacket.

Additionally, the government and the police are concerned over the imminent release of a report into the killing of Jean Charles de Menezes, the innocent Brazilian gunned down by police on the London subway last July. The Independent Police Complaints Commission report has been leaked to the *News of the World*. It makes a series of criticisms of the operation mounted on July 21 that could lead to the resignation of Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Ian Blair, and the prosecution of several police officers for murder.

Throughout these events the media has functioned as an apologist for the government's offensive against democratic rights and a conduit for its propaganda.

According to Home Office figures, up to September 30, 2005, 895 people have been arrested under the Terrorism Act 2000, of which just 23 have been convicted of terrorism-related offences. On June 12 the *Guardian* drew attention to a series of raids in January 2002, leading to the arrest of six men on suspicion of manufacturing chemical devices. Within days all six had been freed without charge, the allegations made against them by a single informant having been discredited.

The media know all this very well. Yet, even after the experience of de Menezes, for the most part the press has parroted uncritically the claims of the government and police on the Forest Gate raid. And when things began to unravel, misinformation supposedly emanating from official sources, such as the notorious claim that one brother had shot the other, was regurgitated and elaborated upon by the media. Slander and character assassination became the order of the day.

Even now that the raid is publicly acknowledged to have been a failure, newspapers across the political spectrum continue to justify it.

The right-wing *Daily Mail* has published comments by Richard Littlejohn urging readers to look at things "from the police's point of view.... What the hell are they supposed to do? Steer clear for fear of upsetting the 'community'?" Melanie Phillips took a novel angle, suggesting that the tip-off was possibly part of an "Al Qaeda strategy to use dissimulation and false trails to confuse its terrorist targets.... MI5 sources are reportedly concerned that they may have been set up."

For its part, the line of the liberal *Observer* was summarised by its headline, "Better a bungled raid than another terrorist outrage."

Such claims dovetail with the position taken by the government and the security services.

Prime Minister Tony Blair defended the raid on the grounds that if the police "have a reasonable piece of intelligence and they believe they have got to investigate—take action on—they should.... Part of the modern world, I'm afraid, is that you have to live with a greater degree of precaution on the part of our security services and our police."

A senior counter-terrorism official also insisted that operations similar to Forest Gate would continue: "There are

dozens of mass casualty attacks being planned against ... the UK, and when we have what we believe is genuine intelligence that life is at risk, we have to act."

What is the balance sheet of the so-called war on terror? Internationally, it has provided the justification for a bloody war of colonial conquest that has destabilized world politics and provided the main recruiting ground for terrorism.

Within Britain it has resulted in the arrest of hundreds of innocent people and adoption of a shoot to kill policy that has left one innocent man dead and another seriously injured.

The list of alleged terrorist threats that have proven to be entirely fictional grows longer by the day. In contrast, when an actual terrorist attack was planned the security services failed to prevent it despite having several of the bombers under surveillance. Moreover, despite regular exercises by the police and emergency services in the capital, the government's contingency plans were found wanting.

The report by the London Assembly into the July 7 London bombings was largely eclipsed by the Forest Gate raid. But its findings demonstrated how the government does not even take its own warnings of a terrorist attack seriously.

Notwithstanding "incredible acts of courage" by emergency staff, subway workers and ordinary people, the report notes that the rescue operation was compromised by a grave lack of resources and failures of communication between the emergency services. The Fire Brigade even had to use people running up and down escalators to get information. Eighteen years after being recommended by the report into the 1987 King's Cross fire, there were still no digital communications that would have enabled communication below ground level. The London Ambulance Service was overwhelmed, leading to a lack of stretchers and other basic equipment. One paramedic described running to a department store to get bandages.

A fundamental political lesson must be drawn from the Forest Gate raid.

The standard rationale for every encroachment by the government on fundamental democratic rights is that the civil liberties of a few must be sacrificed to protect the majority and that the government should be trusted not to abuse the license it has been granted.

Those who portray Forest Gate as merely an unfortunate error that should not detract from the necessity to respond to the terrorist threat are seeking to perpetuate this lie. In reality the raid has once again proven the government to be more concerned with justifying its predatory foreign policy and antidemocratic domestic agenda than ensuring the actual safety of the British population.



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