

British students jailed for possessing “extremist” literature

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Four 20-year-old Bradford University students and a 19-year-old school student were jailed after a trial at the Old Bailey for being found with material said to be “glorifying Islamic terrorism” on their computers. Aitzaz Zafar, Usman Malik and Awaab Iqbaal were jailed for three years each, Akbar Butt was jailed for 27 months and the school student, Mohammed Irfan Raja was given two years’ youth detention.

Such is the atmosphere created by politicians and the media after the attempted terror bombings in London and Glasgow earlier this month that there was very little opposition in the media to what are police state measures—the jailing of these youths merely for downloading material readily available on the Internet.

The case is the first successful prosecution under the Terrorism Act 2000 for possessing material useful for terrorism.

Raja, at the age of 17, had run away from his home in London leaving a note to his parents saying, “if not in this [world] we will meet in [the Garden of Paradise]”. According to the prosecution, he was planning to go and fight in Afghanistan after training in Pakistan, and for that purpose he had joined the four students in Bradford. No serious evidence that this was anything more than an adolescent fantasy is reported.

His parents talked to him over the phone and persuaded him to return home after three days. Raja was said to have been depressed and had discussed Islamic fundamentalism with the Bradford students over the Internet. His parents contacted the police and Raja apparently confessed, during several interviews, of his desire to fight “Muslim causes abroad.” He directed the police to the Bradford students who were arrested for having the extremist material on their computers.

One of the students, Aitzaz Zafar, was interviewed on BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme. Asked whether the

“inflammatory jihadist material” he had downloaded was not an indication of terrorist intent, Zafar said that he was “researching into my religion—looking at all aspects of it.” He had become more “politically aware” as a student, and “research had led me to different sites and places.” The interviewer pressed him on why he had “horrific material,” including the video of a beheading. Zafar said that he had downloaded a zipped file containing more than 200 documents. “I never read all of them and in court they cherry-picked one document—and within that a paragraph.” Asked why he had a copy of the “Terrorist’s Handbook” on his computer, he said he had been in a chat room discussing the Muslim religion and politics, and it was one of the files that had been sent him—“people send you all sorts.”

Reports of the trial claim that the five youths had made Internet contact with a certain British man called Imran who in one online chat had advised them how to travel unnoticed to Pakistan. Also mentioned was a “Brother Ali” in New Jersey, who had told Raja to get in touch with the Bradford students. Whether either of these men had sent them the zipped file or the “Terrorist’s Handbook” is not recorded. They were not produced as witnesses, and no explanation was given of why they were not arrested also. It is hardly a secret that such chat rooms can be used by provocateurs and the intelligence services.

There is clearly some disquiet in establishment circles at the way democratic rights are being trampled on in such cases. David Livingstone, an associate fellow in international security at Chatham House, home of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, appeared as a witness for the defence at the trial. He told the *Today* programme that there was no evidence that the five had planned to instigate a terrorist attack. The prosecution

could “radicalise” young Muslims “through a perceived sense of injustice,” he said.

Claiming the five youths were engaged in “mischievous” activity, Livingstone said, “If you are going to pursue every case of mischief you are going to end up with a very jammed-up criminal justice system and you will certainly have to build more prisons.”

Livingstone called for the traditional method of debating with students who were attracted to Islamic fundamentalism, “instead of slugging away with the rather blunt instrument of the criminal justice system.”

However, top political, legal and police circles are clearly determined to utilise the fear of terrorist attacks, not only to use such draconian measures but to introduce others.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown has said that in the next session of parliament he intends to raise the 28-day limit on the time that police can hold a suspect without charge. Although the proposal for a 90-day period was narrowly defeated when put forward by Tony Blair in 2005, Brown has called for a “consultation” on increasing the time to up to 56 days, supporting police claims that they need more time to plough through computer memories and collect evidence in terrorist cases.

Brown also announced he is intending to bring in a “unified border force” to boost the “fight against terrorism,” creating a “highly visible” uniformed force that would bring together immigration and Customs officers. He is also calling for identity cards to be introduced—in the face of longstanding opposition from human rights campaigners. Other measures will include an attempt to get all-party support for using e-mail and telephone intercepts as evidence.

Brown stated that the police and security services are now tracking 2,000 individuals, an increase of 400 in the past nine months. Security forces claim that there have been 15 terrorist plots discovered since 9/11 and that there are another 30 plots in the making.

Some indication of the increasingly oppressive regime being implemented in Britain by the police and security services, directed particularly at Muslim and Asian youth, was contained in report from the Metropolitan (i.e., London) Police covering the first four months of 2007. Under the anti-terror laws, some 23,000 “stops and searches” were carried out, an increase of 37 percent over the previous year. Only 27

arrests were made on terrorism offences, but 242 other arrests were made. At least 16 percent of those stopped were Asian compared to 12 percent in the population as a whole.

Further evidence that the “war against terror” is allowing all pretence at democratic rights to be swept aside came in a Channel 4 report of how terrorist prisoners are being treated at Frankland Prison, County Durham. Some 10 percent of prisoners in this jail are Muslim and it is said to contain the leaders of the three major terrorism trials that took place in Britain over the last year.

Hussain Osman, one of those convicted for the failed suicide bombing of July 21, 2005, reportedly had his cell set on fire. Channel 4 reported that this event took place after death threats were allegedly made to Omar Khyam, convicted as the ringleader for the so-called fertiliser bomb plot in April of this year. Dhiren Barot, convicted in November of last year for plotting various bomb attacks in the UK and US, was reported having had boiling water thrown at him. Barot suffered severe third-degree burns, described by a prison officer to Channel 4 as one of the worst cases he had seen. These three incidents had all taken place in the last three weeks.

Omar Khyam’s wife told Channel 4 that the prison authorities had been previously warned: “Omar in the end went into segregation himself and only a few days later Dhiren Barot was attacked, which shouldn’t have happened because the prison knew that these threats were taking place.”

According to Channel 4’s sources, there were fascists among the prisoners in the jail—members of Combat 18 or British National party supporters—with swastikas daubed on the walls. A conflict had built up over where the Muslim prisoners were to hold their prayers.



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