

The “anti-terror” arrests in northwest England: what really lies behind them?

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One week after a series of high profile arrests, little evidence has come to light of plans for the mass terrorist atrocity that supposedly triggered the detentions.

Eleven of the 12 people rounded up on April 8—all males aged between 18 and 42 years of age—remain in custody. Under Britain’s draconian anti-terror laws terror suspects can be held for up to 28 days without charge. An 18-year-old youth, one of the 11 Pakistani nationals held, was released at the weekend, but handed over to immigration officials.

Security sources have stated that they expect few, if any, terror-related charges to result from the arrests. Raids on homes and premises in the northwest of England have so far failed to turn up any evidence of bombs, chemical explosives, weapons or ammunition. One senior security source was cited in the *Guardian* as stating that “nothing of huge significance” had been uncovered.

This is a far cry from the hysterical claims that originally attended the arrests. Then police sources claimed that they had thwarted a massive Al Qaeda-directed operation to launch large-scale suicide bomb attacks over the Easter holiday.

Citing information from MI6 operations targeted on Pakistan, anonymous security officials claimed there had been a high risk of an “imminent attack” that would cause “mass casualties.” Prime Minister Gordon Brown described the apparent terror plot as “very big.”

Such is the subsequent backpedalling over the alleged terrorist conspiracy that the *Guardian* stated, “A central mystery remains how counterterrorism officials could believe such a serious plot existed when they were unsure of seemingly basic elements of the alleged conspiracy, such as the targets.”

Indeed. The “evidence” now being presented for the existence of a terror threat appears to centre on reports that several of those detained—most of whom were in the UK on student visas—had been seen taking photographs near a Manchester shopping centre and other public venues. This behaviour, it is argued, is consistent with terrorist reconnaissance. A surveillance team also reportedly heard discussions about certain dates over the Easter holiday, prompting the arrests.

But relatives and neighbours have refuted such claims. The majority of those arrested were students living in some of the poorest areas of Merseyside. One neighbour described how several of those detained had recently staged an impromptu street

celebration during heavy snowfall, playing Hindi music, dancing and encouraging others to join in. “I never had suspicions about them,” she said. “They were jolly guys, not aggressive and never any trouble.”

The father of one of those held, speaking to the media from his home in Peshawar, said his son was in his third year of computer studies in Manchester, on a visa valid until next September. “We have done nothing wrong. We have nothing to hide,” the father stated, calling offensive the lurid press accounts of his son’s alleged terror-related activities.

The uncle of another man told the *Guardian* that the family regularly made financial contributions to help his nephew fund his education. “He was too ambitious about his life and his studies. He was not up to any mischief. So I say to the UK government, please don’t spoil his future,” he pleaded.

Sweeping police powers

It is not the first time that warnings of an imminent terrorist catastrophe, accompanied by mass arrests, have failed to live up to their claims.

In the years since 9/11 more than 1,000 people have been arrested under anti-terrorism laws, of which less than 50 have been convicted.

So sweeping are the anti-terrorism powers that people have been detained on the flimsiest of pretexts. Earlier this month, five people in Plymouth were detained under the Terrorism Act after a young man was seen spraying graffiti. “Political literature” was reportedly found in one of the homes raided and it was claimed at the time that the five had been planning to join the G20 protests in London. Held for several days, they were all released without charge.

All the while, the hysterical atmosphere generated by such arrests has been used to further strengthen police powers and undermine democratic rights. The brutal shooting of innocent Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes in July 2005 by undercover anti-terrorist officers exposed that police had covertly adopted a shoot-to-kill policy. Less than one year later another innocent man, Mohammed Abdul Kahar, was shot by anti-terror police in a raid on his home.

In the latest sweep, Muhammad Adil, a 27-year-old Pakistani student, told how he had been eating lunch outside Liverpool John Moores University when he and a friend were surrounded by armed officers.

Special forces with telescopic machine guns instructed them to raise their hands, and forced them to the floor. Adil's hands were tied behind his back as he lay on the ground for one hour, while police kept their guns trained on him. Taken to a police station, he was released after several hours without charge.

Simultaneously, police were carrying out similarly spectacular arrests in other locations, starting at the 5 p.m. rush-hour.

Two people were detained while working as security guards at a DIY store. A worker at the store told how 80 officers had swooped on the building, and armed police had rushed into the shop, emerging 10 minutes later with the two men.

In the Wavertree district of Liverpool, residents described how unmarked black cars had sped down the street, stopping outside a flat, and a number of men wearing black combat gear had stormed the building. Three men were brought out handcuffed from the building. In a residential area in Manchester, meanwhile, a woman told how she had heard a lot of noise and opened her door to see "four or five policemen were on top of a man. They were dragging him along the street and he had no shoes on. They shouted at me 'get inside, get inside'. There was a policeman on each corner of the street, with machine guns."

The G20 protests

It looks increasingly likely that the lack of evidence of terror-related activities in the latest arrests will be attributed to the fact that the police operation had to be moved forward at the last moment.

Police have already claimed that the arrests were scheduled for 2 a.m. Thursday morning, but this was hurriedly changed after Assistant Commissioner Bob Quick of the Metropolitan Police was photographed the previous day entering Downing Street.

In full view of the cameras, Quick carried a briefing paper—marked top secret—with details of the intended raids. The government had issued a "D" notice preventing publication of the photograph, but concerned that it would be published on the Internet, hundreds of police officers were quickly scrambled for the northwest raids. Quick resigned the following day.

Quick's "gaffe" is now being blamed for compromising an otherwise promising operation.

Just why Britain's senior anti-terror officer was seemingly unaware that he was broadcasting details of a major police operation to the media is just one of many unanswered questions.

The *Times* speculated April 14 that indications that no terror charges would ultimately be laid against those arrested posed "questions about how real this threat was and whether the police were trying to cover their embarrassment over Mr. Quick."

More pertinently, it should be noted that warnings of imminent suicide bombings on a major city came just as the government and

Metropolitan Police faced mounting condemnation of police actions during the G20 summit of world leaders in London, which ended April 3.

During the protests, more than 200 people were arrested, houses were raided, and thousands of people detained for hours by police in London side streets in a practice known as "kettling."

On April 1, Ian Tomlinson—who was making his way home from work—died in one of the side streets. At the time, it was claimed that his death was from natural causes, and unrelated to police measures to contain the protestors. (See "Britain: Evidence of fatal police assault at G20 demonstration")

But on the evening of April 7, the *Guardian* released video footage showing how Tomlinson had been brutally struck from behind by a riot officer, causing him to fall and hit his head on the ground. He died minutes later.

The footage exposed the degree to which police, in collusion with the Independent Police Complaints Commission, had sought to cover over allegations of police brutality during the demonstrations, and fuelled demands for an independent inquiry.

Less than 24 hours later, Britain was faced with another alleged terrorist plot and civil liberties were under further attack.

At the weekend, it was announced that plainclothes, armed police units are to be deployed on the streets of Scotland for the first time.

No official statement, let alone discussion, accompanied this unprecedented move. But the *Scotsman* newspaper editorialised in support of the deployment, citing the alleged northwest terror plot, which it said could have led to "blood and suffering" on the streets of Manchester.

"As we assess our readiness against a terror attack we must also decide what concessions we are willing to make in our day-to-day liberties. To say we will surrender none is unreasonable," it claimed.



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