

London: Metropolitan Police caught out extending armed patrols

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Recent events have revealed how the police specialist gun squad CO19 had instigated armed patrols of socially deprived estates in London, apparently without any authorisation and definitely without informing the public.

The development is particularly sinister, coming as it does after the killing of Jean Charles de Menezes by CO19 officers, carried out under an official shoot-to-kill policy, Operation Kratos, which was similarly never discussed publicly. Kratos, and subsequent revised operation procedures, justified state execution in the name of the “war on terror.” The recent actions by CO19 point towards the broader application of such policies in domestic policing.

The plan for armed patrols only came to light in an article published in *Jane’s Police Review*. CO19 Chief Inspector Neil Sharman said the unit was to develop a more “proactive approach.” Rather than being used to respond to calls about gun crime, the unit would, he suggested, move towards routine sweeps of housing estates. Both foot patrols and roving motorcycle operations would be undertaken by the handpicked CO19 squads. Armed with Heckler & Koch MP5 semi-automatic guns and Glock semi-automatic pistols, these squads would be permanently deployed to carry out regular “weapons sweeps” of specific areas.

The article revealed that, beginning in the summer, trials involving the patrols had already been carried out in five London boroughs. The patrols were being piloted in Tottenham and Haringey in north London, and Brixton in the south of the capital.

The pilot team had consisted of 18 officers led by an inspector and two sergeants. Inspector Derek Carroll told *Police Review* that this squad, operating on a trial basis since June, would double in size during

November to meet growing demand for its deployment. Carroll boasted, “Historically, CO19 was only called out when someone rang up to report a gun crime. But...we are looking at gangs that have access to firearms and will be robust in dealing with them.”

The “robustness” previously exercised by CO19 led to the death of Harry Stanley and James Ashley. Stanley was shot dead by police as he left a pub. He was attempting to raise his hands when he was shot. He was carrying a table leg in a plastic bag. Police said they believed it was a sawn-off shotgun. Ashley was shot dead at point-blank range by a police officer bursting into his flat in a raid organised using a last-resort tactic for rescuing hostages. The officer who killed him claimed that it was too dark to see that Ashley was naked, although he said he was able to identify him as the target of the raid, and that he believed he was armed.

Although he discussed this as a tactical shift, Carroll appealed to the current extensive deployment of armed officers across the capital to justify the move. Londoners, he said, were already “used to seeing armed officers, but this is taking it away from the main roads to where these gangs are hanging around.” He insisted that this move was not contrary to the old-fashioned view of community policing: “We chat to people,” he said, “and they love it.”

Press opposition to the CO19 proposals centred on the assertion that armed police are not currently deployed on routine patrols. However, the CO19 statements revealed the extent to which weapons *are* already carried. Officers are routinely armed at perceived terrorist targets, such as Heathrow Airport, and CO19 currently undertakes about 40 operations each week. The proposals are therefore not, as Green Party member of the Metropolitan Police Authority

(MPA) Jenny Jones put it, a “departure from normal policing tactics,” but an extension of them. As with Operation Kratos, repressive police measures were already in use long before they become public knowledge.

Although some officers expressed concerns that such patrols would inevitably result in a majority of police being armed, the move was not opposed within the police force. The Police Federation, which has campaigned against the wider arming of officers, said it did not object to the scheme. Simon Reed, vice-chairman of the Federation, said that police needed to be able to use firearms “when appropriate.”

Locally, there was anger at the announcement. The areas patrolled have long histories of police violence against their ethnic minority populations. Under these circumstances, local politicians felt they had to voice token opposition to the proposals, even though they were largely supportive of the arming of police. Tottenham’s Labour MP David Lammy distanced himself from the patrols only on the grounds that he had not been consulted on them.

The Tory Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, expressed his “concern” at the reports because the measure had not been agreed on, but insisted on his general support for armed policing. After talking with the Metropolitan Police’s Chief Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson, he declared that Stephenson had allayed his fears over the routine use of armed officers. Johnson’s senior aide and deputy mayor for policing, Kit Malthouse, accused Jenny Jones of reacting “hysterically” for mildly expressing her unease at the CO19 announcement.

Police Commissioner Stephenson, who claimed not to have been fully briefed on the proposals, tried to limit public anger with a series of media appearances. He stressed that the move was in fact a “small authorised extension” of routine policing, expressing concern only that the “wrong language” used by CO19 officers had mistakenly given “a significant impression of a change.”

Even as he publicly announced the suspension of the patrols, Stephenson was careful to defend the ongoing extension of “non-routine” use of armed officers. He justified the eight operations already conducted since the summer as being “intelligence” driven.

Tensions no doubt exist between the police and

Johnson’s administration and even between the Police and the Conservative Party. Johnson and Malthouse are seeking to bring the Metropolitan Police under their direct political control. In September, Malthouse told the press that the mayor’s office now had their “hands on the tiller” of the force, having successfully “elbowed the Home Office out of the picture.” This followed Johnson’s clash with Stephenson’s predecessor, Sir Ian Blair, whom he saw as being too close to Labour.

Policy documents outlining the force’s priorities were now being prepared by the mayor’s office, said Malthouse, and they had no problem in encouraging the police to do things that would be electorally popular.

Nationally, the Conservatives are examining Johnson’s mayoral model for local political control of the police force ahead of the coming General Election. This has met with strong opposition from the highest echelons of the force in an argument that is reactionary on both sides. Sir Hugh Orde, the former Chief Constable of Northern Ireland who now heads the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), told the BBC that it was “absolutely critical” that the police remained operationally independent. If they came under the sway of local politicians, he argued, then the police might not be able to make far-reaching changes that might be unpopular. Some chief constables might even resign if faced with the loss of control, Orde warned.

The “local accountability” being counterposed to this is political control by a right-wing Tory administration, which will decide what measures should be employed by the state apparatus in the offensive against social gains and civil liberties. Under either scenario, the extension of repressive police powers such as those unwittingly exposed in the capital will continue unabated.



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