

British government calls for more repressive powers following deportation of Abu Qatada

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In the wake of the deportation of Muslim cleric Abu Qatada to Jordan, a crackdown is being prepared on legal provisions by the British government, together with a strengthening of repressive measures directed against political organisations deemed “extremist”.

The extradition of Qatada to face terrorism charges was hailed by the entire political establishment as a victory. After Conservative Home Secretary Theresa May announced on Sunday morning that Qatada had left Britain on a private jet in the early hours, former Labour Party home secretary John Reid responded by declaring, “We all wish we were in May’s position now”.

The radical Islamist cleric came to Britain in the mid 1990s, and was alleged to be in contact with leading figures within Al Qaeda. He was at one time described as Osama Bin Laden’s “spiritual ambassador” in Europe. He was first detained by the authorities in 2001.

Qatada’s case illustrates the complete disregard for basic democratic and legal principles within Britain’s ruling elite. He was held in detention for more than eight years without ever being charged with a crime. The evidence, which forms the basis of the charges he will now face in Jordan, was gathered through the use of torture, in which the British and American intelligence services are both implicated.

Despite rulings by several judges that the conditions of Qatada’s detention were inhumane and in breach of human rights law, the government ignored calls from an immigration tribunal last year recommending that he be released on highly restrictive bail.

Along with government colleagues, May claimed that the safety of Qatada and his access to a fair trial had been secured through an inter-governmental agreement with the Jordanian authorities. This supposedly ensures

that he will not suffer ill-treatment in Jordan and that evidence obtained through torture would not be permissible in his trial. This is laughable. There is no legal basis to guarantee such assurances, with the only enforcement mechanism being the monitoring of Qatada’s treatment by a local human rights organisation.

Moreover, a precedent has been created that allows the government to send detainees to face trial in Jordan or another authoritarian regime in the Middle East, where their legal rights will be non-existent.

Immediately after Qatada had been flown out of the UK from an army air base in London, government officials vowed to do away with many of the rights granted to defendants in the deportation process, including the right to appeal. May complained that the proceedings against Qatada had taken 12 years, before stating that this should “never happen again”. She continued that it would be necessary to eliminate the “many layers of appeals available to foreign nationals we want to deport”.

Such measures are expected to appear in the government’s immigration bill in the autumn, which will roll out a raft of proposals designed to target the rights of immigrants to social welfare, education and health care.

The media have largely hailed Qatada’s deportation, without any concern as to its implications for democratic rights. Simon Jenkins wrote bluntly in the *Guardian*, “British citizens are entitled to some benefit of doubt, but the state is entitled to demand good behaviour from visitors or potential citizens or send them home”.

A withdrawal of the UK from the European Convention of Human Rights is actively being discussed within the government. This comes just

weeks after May indicated that the government is to expand its powers to target “extremists”. Responding to the killing of soldier Lee Rigby in London, the home secretary said she intended to free up the government to ban political organisations more easily, remove material from the Internet deemed inappropriate and grant the press regulator Ofcom the power to censor interviews on television and in other forms of media with individuals considered to be “extremist”.

The erosion of democratic rights in Britain is already far advanced. The vast battery of counter-terrorism legislation adopted in the aftermath of 9/11 has created the framework of a police state, including detention without trial, the undermining of freedom of speech and expression, a vast expansion of the operations of intelligence services and attacks on the right to a fair trial.

In the same week that Qatada’s deportation was finalised, the Justice and Security Act 2013 came into force, which institutionalises a procedure allowing the government to use secret evidence in any civil trial.

Although the justification for the build-up of these powers is the “war on terror” and the need to combat “Islamic extremism”, the real target of these anti-democratic measures is the working class. The exposure by former National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden of the huge spying operations run from Britain, which goes beyond even those organised in the United States, has illustrated that the ruling elite is monitoring the activities of the whole population.

In any event, it was not a lack of powers at the disposal of the state that provoked the delays in deporting Qatada. Rather it was concerns that the pursuit of a legal trial in Britain could have revealed the involvement of British intelligence forces in cultivating him as a useful asset. This was part of a much broader policy by the security services of developing connections with Islamist figures operating in Britain who allied themselves with Al Qaeda.

As well as providing information on Muslim communities to the MI5 domestic spying operation, this collaboration allowed the intelligence services to organise political provocations that could then be used to legitimise further attacks on democratic rights. The supposed danger posed by such figures was used as a justification for the vast expansion of state powers

contained within the Terrorism Act 2000, and subsequent pieces of legislation including the Terrorism Act 2006, which contained unprecedented attacks on freedom of speech rights.

In this environment, the police and special security forces were given the green light to operate with ever more open brutality, as was tragically displayed in the murder of Jean Charles de Menezes in London in the summer of 2005.

Close relations were developed with the radical Islamist preacher Abu Hamza al-Masri, who was protected for years by the secret services before being tried and sentenced to jail in 2006. The Finsbury Park mosque in London, where Hamza preached, was heavily infiltrated by intelligence agents.

Security forces first approached Qatada in the late 1990s to urge him to tone down his “rhetoric” in his sermons, according to a *Guardian* report. Shortly before the then Labour government of Tony Blair introduced anti-terrorist legislation providing for detention without trial, Qatada disappeared and was discovered several months later in a council house in south London. Later investigations uncovered the involvement of intelligence services in helping him evade capture.

In an investigation carried out by the *Times*, it was shown that Britain had received warnings from six allied governments about the potential risk posed by Qatada, but had initially not taken any action.

Summing up the reasons for the delay in legal proceedings against Qatada, Richard Norton-Taylor wrote last year in the *Guardian*, “Putting the terror suspect on trial would quite simply embarrass MI5”. This was because “far too much embarrassing information about MI5 and the Met Police would come out in court”.



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