

Britain uses anti-terror powers to detain Yemeni activist

Jordan Shilton
28 September 2013

Baraa Shibani, a Yemeni activist who has campaigned against the use of drones, was detained by British authorities on Monday and questioned under anti-terror legislation.

Shibani's detention comes just one month after police detained David Miranda, the partner of *Guardian* journalist Glenn Greenwald, who collaborated with former National Security Agency whistle-blower Edward Snowden in exposing mass surveillance by US and UK spy agencies.

Miranda's, and now Shibani's detention confirms the increasing use of anti-terrorist legislation to target political opponents.

Shibani was detained at Gatwick airport by border agents under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000, which permits the holding of an individual for up to nine hours without access to a lawyer. Shibani was held for over an hour, during which time he was questioned on his political views and activities. He was threatened with a longer period of detention if he did not cooperate by answering questions as to the nature of his political work in Yemen.

Shibani works for the legal charity Reprieve, which is based in London and campaigns for human rights and the rule of law. As head of the organisation's operations in Yemen, he has led investigations into the impact of drone killings on civilians in that country, something which has become a regular occurrence under the Obama administration. The US government has stepped up its use of drones in Yemen, killing a US citizen, Anwar al-Alawki, in 2011. Shibani's organisation supports the victims of drone attacks, including with legal proceedings.

According to a *Guardian* article, Reprieve had recently discovered evidence revealing the complicity of British authorities in US drone strikes in Yemen.

Britain provided the intelligence and communications infrastructure to facilitate the attacks. Shibani was questioned on this by his interrogators, stating to the *Guardian* that he was told, "Your organisation has obviously been causing a lot of problems to your country. The relations between your government and the UK are vital for us."

In a further exchange, he was asked, "What if your organisation did something bad to your government, and you are here because of the bad things your organisation has done to your government? I want to know, because the relations between Yemen and the UK are important. I want to know that your organisation is not disrupting that."

The targeting of Shibani is an attempt by the UK government to intimidate all opposition to its imperialist military operations abroad in alliance with the US. To this end, all political opponents face being designated as terrorists in order to deny them the most basic legal and democratic rights. As Shibani put it in his *Guardian* piece, "Even we in Yemen heard of David Miranda's nine hours in custody. Then I was stopped. Who will be the next human rights worker caught in the net of schedule 7?"

The extensive powers at the disposal of the state not only to detain individuals, but also to examine any of their possessions, were demonstrated by the detention of Miranda last month. Abetted by the courts, the police have been granted virtually unhindered access to his personal belongings on the grounds of "national security" considerations.

Miranda had been travelling back from Berlin to Brazil, and was carrying leaked documents on the UK's intelligence operations. He faces the prospect of having criminal charges brought against him.

Following Shibani's detention, Greenwald revealed

internal US intelligence documents leaked by Snowden which illustrate the hostility with which opponents of the use of drones are viewed. In one of the documents, part of a posting on an internal web site, the authors list a series of “threats” to drone use, including weather conditions, air defence systems and electronic warfare. In addition, there is what the document refers to as “propaganda campaigns which target UAV (drone) use.” Any such activity is considered by the spy agencies as “adversary propaganda themes.”

The document contains a blunt justification for the undermining of basic legal principles by the Obama administration and its allies in the UK and other countries, above all on the right of due process. The intelligence document states, under the heading “nationality of target vs. due process,” that “Attacks against American and European persons who have become violent extremists are often criticized by propagandists, arguing that lethal action against these individuals deprives them of due process.”

As Greenwald states, “In the eyes of the US government, ‘due process’—the idea that the US government should not deprive people of life away from a battlefield without presenting evidence of guilt is no longer a basic staple of the American political system, but rather a malicious weapon of propagandists.”

In a related development, Greenwald reported on the case of Shahzad Akbar, a lawyer with Reprieve based in Pakistan who is currently suing the US government over its drone killings of civilians there. The Obama administration refused to grant Akbar a visa this week to enter the US, where the lawyer was to have testified before Congress on the US government’s drone programme.

The Reprieve activists were portrayed as supporters of terrorism. In his questioning by border agents, Shiban reported that he was accused of aiding terrorists because he had dared to criticise the “counterterrorism” operations of the western powers.

The presentation of opponents of drone strikes as supporters of terrorism is particularly dishonest, coming from the very governments who are not only committing terrorist acts by using drones, but also collaborating so intimately with terrorist groups with close links to Al Qaeda in a proxy war in Syria.

Evidence exists showing that British intelligence

played a key role in fomenting the “rebels” in their war against the Assad regime. Although it was forced to temporarily pull back from a military strike, the US has stepped up its funding of these organisations, including by supplying arms.

Moreover, if the British and American authorities are suggesting that any opposition to drone strikes automatically equates to support for “terrorism” and places individuals in the “enemy” camp, this must be their view of the vast majority of the population. In a 2012 survey, the Pew research centre found that more than half of the population in 17 of the 20 countries surveyed was opposed to drone strikes. In Greece, 90 percent were opposed, in Egypt 89 percent, Jordan (85 percent), Turkey (81 percent), Spain (76 percent), Brazil (76 percent) and Japan (75 percent). Even in countries where support was higher, such as Britain, 47 percent of people still rejected drone killings.

The increasingly authoritarian methods being employed by the state against activists and human rights campaigners are ultimately aimed at the widespread opposition in the working class to their policies of imperialist war abroad and devastating social cuts at home.



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