

The arrest of journalist Richard Medhurst and the fight to defend democratic rights

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The arrest of independent journalist Richard Medhurst under anti-terrorism legislation is a dramatic intensification of the assault on democratic rights in Britain and internationally.

Medhurst's arrest is part of a broader effort by the Labour government to criminalize and intimidate opposition to the genocide in Gaza that has seen mass demonstrations in Britain and throughout the world.

Medhurst was arrested at London's Heathrow Airport on August 15 as he disembarked from his plane, under Section 12 of the Terrorism Act (2000). He was held for almost 24 hours, questioned, and had all his electronic devices and journalistic equipment confiscated.

Medhurst said on his X account, "I believe I'm the first journalist to be arrested under this provision of the Terrorism Act."

Given the fact that Medhurst had only booked his plane ticket back to London earlier that day, the arrest confirms that he was under state surveillance. That same day he had criticised on his X account the "fascist 'terrorism act' being used to hold activists without charge or trial because they tried to stop actual terrorism and genocide by the IDF [Israel Defence Forces]."

Medhurst was arrested under draconian provisions in the 2000 Act, amended in 2019, which allow a person to be jailed for up to 14 years for what is tantamount to a thought crime—"express[ing] an opinion or belief that is supportive of a proscribed organisation" and in doing so being "reckless as to whether a person to whom the expression is directed will be encouraged to support a proscribed organisation."

Medhurst's journalism focuses on exposing US, British and Israeli war crimes in Gaza and across the Middle East. He was arrested by a state whose leading politicians, Labour and Conservative, have for the last 10 months denounced protests against Israel's genocide as antisemitic and "hate marches."

The crackdown on democratic rights is necessitated by the war and austerity agenda of the ruling elite, with every major imperialist power backing the slaughter of the Palestinians by the fascist Israeli regime and supporting NATO's war against Russia in Ukraine.

Faced with mass popular opposition and the need for a stepped-up offensive against jobs, wages and essential services to pay for war, the Labour government and the ruling class

everywhere must turn ever more decisively to state repression, including targeting those journalists and political activists who oppose and expose war, war crimes and genocide.

The British ruling class has escalated its attacks on left-wing journalists as part of a broader offensive against democratic rights, ever since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The invasion was deliberately provoked by decades of NATO encroachment to Russia's borders, and following the 2014 regime-change operation that brought a right-wing pro-US regime to power in Kiev.

- On April 17, 2023, French publisher **Ernest Moret** was arrested as he arrived in London St Pancras Station under anti-terror laws, justified by his participation in mass protests in France against Macron's pension cuts. Moret was stopped under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000, allowing "examining officers" at ports and airports to stop, question and/or detain people to investigate suspected acts of terrorism.

- On May 17, 2023, British journalist **Kit Klarenberg** was arrested at Luton Airport after arriving from Belgrade, Serbia. Klarenberg, a writer for *The Grayzone*, was interrogated, had his bank cards, electronic devices and SD cards seized, and his fingerprints, photo and DNA taken, under Schedule 3 to the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019.

- On October 16, 2023, **Craig Murray**, a human rights activist, former British diplomat and prominent defender of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange—imprisoned at the time in London's maximum security Belmarsh prison—was detained under Section 7 of the Terrorism Act (2000) at Glasgow Airport. Murray was returning from Iceland where he met with senior figures in the Julian Assange defence campaign.

The Assange precedent

Medhurst too was a trenchant opponent of Assange's incarceration. He reported from inside the High Court in London as recently as June as Assange battled the attempt to extradite him to the US for exposing the war crimes of the imperialist powers.

The detention of Assange from 2010 until his release in June this year was a milestone in the offensive of the ruling class against democratic rights. Assange was for 14 years the most prominent victim of the campaign to silence journalists involved in the exposure of imperialist war crimes, and many of

those targeted for state repression were involved in the fight for his freedom.

This includes the late David Miranda, partner of then-*Guardian* journalist Glenn Greenwald, who in 2013 was detained by the British government at Heathrow Airport under Schedule 7 of the Terrorism Act 2000. Miranda was carrying a thumb drive with classified material provided by US National Security Agency whistle-blower Edward Snowden.

In a June 24 Perspective column on Assange's release, the *World Socialist Web Site* editorial board warned:

Though Assange is free, the global capitalist offensive against democratic rights is only accelerating. For every tactical retreat by imperialism, there is a more brutal counterattack... In fact, by effectively torturing a journalist into admitting violations of the Espionage Act by disseminating true information in the public interest, the Biden administration has set a dangerous new precedent for the attack on press freedom.

The election of the Starmer Labour government one month later confirmed this warning.

Sir Keir Starmer played a central role in Assange's persecution as director of public prosecutions at the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) from 2008-13. At a time when the CPS was overseeing moves to extradite Assange to Sweden to face questioning over bogus sexual assault allegations, Starmer made four trips to Washington--in 2009, 2011, 2012 and 2013. In 2013, the CPS pressured Swedish prosecutors into maintaining their fraudulent investigation into Assange as a pretext for his onward extradition to the US, with uncovered emails from the CPS to their Swedish counterparts warning, "Don't you dare get cold feet!"

Now, in a move that would have been agreed to by Starmer and Home Secretary Yvette Cooper, Labour has pioneered the use of an amendment to the Terrorism Act passed by the Tories to once again attempt to silence and criminalise a journalist and political activist.

The same course is being pursued by governments throughout the world.

In April this year, hundreds of police officers broke up a Palestine Congress in Berlin, Germany. The Ministry of the Interior banned former Greek finance minister and chairman of the pan-European party DiEM25 Yanis Varoufakis from entering the country, together with Dr. Ghassan Abu Sittah, a medical doctor and rector of Glasgow University. Sittah had worked with Doctors Without Borders in Gaza hospitals during the war and testified at the International Court of Justice, where Germany stands accused of aiding and abetting genocide.

In May, anti-Zionist Israeli historian Ilan Pappé—who was visiting the United States to speak at public meetings—was

stopped and interrogated at Detroit airport. Agents from the Department of Homeland Security confiscated and copied the contents of his cell phone before returning it to him.

Earlier this month, the Federal Bureau of Investigation raided the upstate New York home of Scott Ritter, the former US Marine Corps intelligence officer and United Nations weapons inspector who is a vocal opponent of the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine. Ritter was raided based on a potential violation of the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA).

In Britain, Germany, France and many other countries, the attack on anti-war sentiment has even seen the criminalisation of the slogan, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free," leading to dozens of arrests.

This war on journalism has reached its horrifying conclusion with the murder of at least 116 media workers and journalists by Israel during its extermination of the Palestinians in Gaza.

The arrest of Medhurst is a confirmation of the analysis of the Socialist Equality Party regarding the pro-imperialist character of the Labour Party and the impossibility of fighting genocide and police-state rule by pressurising or making appeals to capitalist governments. Capitalism is no longer compatible with the preservation of democratic forms of rule under conditions of war and escalating social reaction.

Defending Medhurst and essential democratic rights such as freedom of the press and stopping the genocide in Gaza require mobilizing the working class against Britain's Labour government and its counterparts internationally. It means building a mass movement against imperialist war, rooted in the working class and centred on the fight for socialism.



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