UK Prime Minister Burnham claims “strong indications” Iran played role in RAF Fairford incident, as unanswered questions pile up

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Wednesday saw Prime Minister Andy Burnham finally make an open suggestion that Iran was implicated in events that led to the arrest of five men near Royal Air Force (RAF) Fairford in Gloucestershire, England.

Speaking after the end of the Labour Party conference on a terror investigation ongoing since Sunday, Burnham told the BBC, “There are strong indications that Iran played a part in what happened over the weekend at RAF Fairford, but of course it remains an ongoing, complex, and serious police investigation.

“And of course, we are working closely with our colleagues in the United States of America. So it’s ongoing.”

“We will say more in due course, but we can confirm our belief that we believe Iran to have played a part,” he continued.

The arrests in the early hours of Sunday morning unleashed immediate speculation of a bomb plot targeting the base from which US planes have taken off on bombing sorties against Iran. But events over the following days saw revelations that threw a question mark over heavy suggestions of Iranian involvement, and even over whether there was any terror incident to be involved in.

The suspects were initially detained under the Explosives Act and later under Section 5 of the Terrorism Act. US President Donald Trump immediately stoked a media firestorm by declaring Sunday that the men had been intending to carry out a “terror plot” and “looking to do big damage”. Speaking to reporters, Trump stated that the US had been “working with Britain” and “had them under view for a long time and we got them.”

On Monday, UK Defence Secretary Wes Streeting told reporters the UK would not be “cowed by sabre-rattling from Iran” or allow the country to “dictate our foreign policy”. That evening, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio declared that the event in Fairford “clearly involves the hands of a foreign actor” and thanked the UK for being cooperative.

However, from the night the arrests took place the police’s own actions and the official statements of both the police and the UK government were blowing holes in the narrative presented by the US government.

The initial report was that a farmer had encountered three white vans blocking a road near Fairford. Having turned around, she says she saw a large group of hooded and masked men (more than five) near a junction. They dispersed after seeing her.

The woman attempted to contact the Ministry of Defence Police, receiving no answer, before calling Gloucestershire police on 999 at 1:36 a.m. to report suspicious activity.

Armed police supported by a helicopter arrived 10 minutes later, arresting five men 300 metres from the Fairford perimeter. The local area was declared the scene of a major incident, with over 80 households evacuated while army bomb disposal personnel examined the three vans using robots.

Later that day, British police and intelligence sources suggested that the specific activities of the arrested men were not necessarily known to the authorities, as Trump’s remarks implied. However, Counter Terror Police took over the investigation, stating that they were investigating whether those involved “might have been acting knowingly or unknowingly on behalf of a foreign state”.

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The official position of the emergency government Cobra meetings held Sunday and Monday was that the investigation was live but it was too early to establish attribution.

At 4 p.m. on Monday, police then made the extraordinary announcement that all five men would be released on police bail, under stringent conditions but without charge. Terror suspects can be held for up to 14 days. The action was described as an "investigative" decision "grounded in experience and careful considerations of policing powers".

This confirmed that no physical evidence of a bomb plot had been found.

A former head of the UK's National Counter Terrorism Security Office, Chris Phillips, told *Al Jazeera*, "If there had been any trace of explosives found in the vans, or any thoughts that these men were actually terrorists, they would not have been released."

The three vans, it was revealed, carried only plastic barrels, with one containing "a quantity of petrol". All the vehicles displayed a counterfeit red logo reading "Fuel2You". Police said they could "confirm that no improvised explosive devices were found."

Phillips added that a terror investigation would have meant keeping the suspects held in custody to "go through all their records and all their contacts and what they've been doing and what they've been talking about." No information has been released about the five arrestees, other than that they are all from men from London in their 20s.

Just as suspiciously, it was revealed Tuesday that one of the arrested men had himself called the police at 12:45 a.m. Sunday morning, almost an hour before the farmer's call to Gloucestershire police.

These facts led to widespread suggestions that a gang of fuel thieves, not terrorists, had been caught. Afzal Ashraf, visiting fellow in international relations and security at Loughborough University and a former senior Royal Air Force officer, told *Al Jazeera* that the local area had many houses reliant on heating oil stored in tanks.

"When you've got several hundred litres in gardens, that's a bit of a killing for somebody," he said, calling this "an alternative and probably more plausible explanation" than a terror plot. "There's absolutely nothing else at all, at the moment, suggesting that there is a link to any foreign government," he added.

Trump responded angrily to the release of the five: "I would have said 'Don't let them have bail'. I'm surprised that they released them. I wouldn't have done that." Asked by reporters whether he thought the incident had a connection with Iran, he replied, "It might," declining to elaborate but claiming he knew the answer. Rubio also stated that "there was a lot more news to come" and stressed US concerns at the release of the five men.

Trump smugly declared of the five men at one point, "We know everything about them." But to date, neither Trump nor Rubio has explicitly accused Iran of responsibility.

The Iranian Embassy in the UK responded by saying it "categorically rejects and strongly condemns the recent unfounded and malicious speculations published by some British individuals and media outlets attempting to link Iran to the arrest of five suspects in the vicinity of RAF Fairford base."

Newsweek senior editor Shane Croucher gave a shrewd analysis of the Trump administration's motivation behind aggressively suggesting Iranian involvement, writing that the Fairford incident "might be just the incident president Donald Trump has needed after months of frustration with NATO allies.

"In March, after European allies rebuffed his request for help reopening the Strait of Hormuz… Fairford now offers a test closer to the alliance's purpose—defending an ally's own soil."

Burnham's latest statement, though still cautious, indicates that Britain is now adopting the Iranian terror narrative, telling the BBC that he couldn't "go into all of those details" regarding Iranian involvement, "but obviously I wouldn't say it lightly."

He told Sky News that he would not hesitate to recall parliament if this became necessary.

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