

Police invasion of Forest Gate: 'anti-terror raid' or psychological warfare?

The 2nd June police invasion of Forest Gate has set a new precedent for a so-called 'anti-terror raid'. A neighbourhood was invaded by more than 200 police, many of them wearing chemical protection suits, and accompanied by MI5 agents. They blocked off streets around a 'suspect' house and even imposed an exclusion zone for any flights overhead. With a gun ready for firing, police entered a house and quickly shot a man, Mohammed Abdul Kahar.

According to police, their raid was based on 'specific intelligence' about equipment for a suicide bombing. Afterwards Prime Minister Tony Blair said, 'I support the police 101% – and the security services'. The shooting intensified arguments about whether the 'specific intelligence' was wrong and so whether the police should apologise. Eventually they did apologise for causing 'disruption and inconvenience to many residents' – though not for the raid or shooting, which they justified as necessary for 'public safety' (Met Police statement, 8th June).

Of course, the Forest Gate raid made us no safer. This was no mistake. The raid cannot be explained by advance information about a 'terror suspect'.

Rather, it was a propaganda show, in the latest stage of psychological warfare. The show depended upon collusion by an eager mass media. Immediately after the shooting, enthusiastic radio journalists deduced that the raid must be 'significant' for counter-terror because so many police were involved. The next day's newspapers reinforced this strange logic. On its front page, the *Daily Mail* screamed, 'Hunt for the "Poison Bomb"'. Likewise *The Times* headline read: 'Police hunt for lethal chemical suicide vest'. The hypothetical item was pictured with a caption: 'It is thought that the vest the police are searching for could be similar...' *The Guardian* headline read: 'Fears of chemical or biological attack triggered terror raid'.

What threat does this signify? As Stephen Dorril said in his history of the British intelligence services, a primary role has been to create public fear. Indeed, our 'security services' have a long history of psychological warfare, inventing or exaggerating threats to justify special powers. And journalists have a long history of reproducing scare stories as if they were truth.

Such stories today draw links between Al-Qaeda, 'Islamic terrorism', asylum seekers and disaffected young Muslims in Britain. As Martin Bright of *The Observer* documented back in 2003, MI5 officers discretely brief journalists who then publish the briefing as reality. These scares were intensified in the run-up to the March 2003 attack on Iraq, when the government desperately invented Iraqi WMD and links with terrorist threats here. The invention continues apace: twenty 'major conspiracies' have been uncovered, claims the Home Secretary.

Many such claims have had insufficient evidence for a criminal prosecution, much less for a conviction. A few years ago, we supposedly faced cyanide attacks on the London tube and ricin attacks in the street. In reality, the only 'conspiracy' was fear-mongering by government agents. Now they create more scares to perpetuate their politics of fear and 'war on terror'.

After the July 2005 bomb attack on the London tube, the Prime Minister said, 'The rules of the game have changed.' Now we see more clearly what he meant: If the price of thorough

police investigation is that ‘occasionally they get it wrong, that is a price worth paying’ (Shahid Malik MP, speaking for the government on 5th June). Such excuses for the Forest Gate raid send out clear messages:

- that a ‘thorough police investigation’ can legitimately mean invading an entire neighbourhood and holding it hostage;
- that ‘terror suspects’ will be treated pre-emptively as guilty; and
- that the police may shoot anyone they regard as a ‘terror suspect’, even in their own home.

Moreover, according to the official logic, failure to find terrorist threats means that the police have not looked hard enough, and that terrorists conceal their activities in the guise of normality. According to one journalist, echoing an MI5 view:

This new generation of terrorists is more discreet than its predecessors. They no longer gather at mosques, where clerics rant against Western governments, or congregate with known militants. Instead they prefer to set up their own youth clubs, using back rooms in their parents’ houses to devise their schemes (Daniel McGrory, *The Times*, 3 June 2006)

This diagnosis justifies government efforts at pervasive, endless ‘intelligence-gathering’, which creates more and more ‘terror suspects’. Information is sought on entire communities, especially on ‘extremist’ politics. Such ‘extremism’ includes sympathy for any resistance to British military activity abroad or to oppressive regimes allied with Britain. For a long time, refugees here have been blackmailed into acting as police informants; now this pressure is being extended to all migrant and Muslim communities. Some elected representatives actively justify police surveillance and terror in the name of ‘security’ or ‘safety’.

Through both overt repression and covert surveillance, then, the state is turning many communities into internal colonies. This recolonisation draws upon the experience of British colonial rule, where counter-insurgency strategies blurred any distinction between violent and non-violent resistance. Such blurring demonised all resistance and so justified terror tactics in the name of self-defence. By analogy, ‘suspect communities’ in Britain today are seen as concealing ‘terror suspects’. The British state carries out psychological warfare to frighten them and the wider society, as we saw in the Forest Gate invasion.

We are all terror suspects now. ‘Better safe than sorry’ means that we all become less safe and less free.

In response, we say:

- Oppose all ‘anti-terror’ laws and their use!
- Everyone must be treated as innocent until proven guilty!
- No punishment without trial!
- Stop psychological warfare!

What you can do

- Join and organise protests against political terror
- Keep informed by joining our mailing list.

All are welcome to attend our monthly meetings, next on Monday 19th June
7-9pm at Camden Town Hall, Judd St WC1 (Kings Cross station)

Campaign against Criminalising Communities (CAMPACC)
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