

Police attack on Gaza convoy: terrorising solidarity

On 13th February anti-terror powers were used to detain Burnley supporters of the Viva Palestina aid convoy enroute from Britain to Gaza.¹ Police also cordoned off two houses of British Asians during a search, thus portraying them as a threat. An Imam and his wife were subjected to strip searches in their own home.

Information on the arrests was fed to the mass media — for publication at the same time as delegations from many parts of Britain converged on London for the Gaza trip. By 15th February, six of the detainees had been released but without passports. Three from Burnley were still being held; plus the ambulance that they were driving.

By 17th February all detainees were finally released – without charge. But cash and mobile phones were still not returned by the police.

When police disrupted the Viva Palestina convoy enroute to Gaza, they attacked solidarity here with people resisting oppression abroad and discouraged donations. These effects were deliberate. If anyone had ever wanted to smuggle funds to Gaza to buy arms, they would hardly have chosen to travel with a group that was deliberately seeking publicity, with an embedded journalist reporting daily on its progress. Nor would they have chosen a convoy so obviously likely to be scrutinised and/or blocked by the Israeli authorities. The Viva Palestina convoy is supported by the Stop the War Coalition, the Respect Party, the Anglo-Arab Organisation, several UK trade unions and Muslim organisations.

Yet again the police have used ‘anti-terror’ laws to promote a politics of fear, aimed at isolating migrant and Muslim communities, while justifying unjust powers. Yet again they have turned cash and mobile phones into objects of suspicion. The police attack put convoy supporters on the defensive for carrying cash. According to one supporter, ‘There was cash around because none of the main banks would allow us to open an account.’²

Indeed, police attacks and investigations frighten banks into refusing or closing accounts for charitable as well as political activities. Therefore those trying to transfer money must find alternatives, such as carrying cash, which police turn into a focus of suspicion. Kurdish and Turkish activists have been prosecuted for supposedly raising funds for terrorism, though they were not convicted by the jury.³

As in the Viva Palestina incident, the climate of suspicion generated by the ‘war on terror’ means that banks perceive a risk of being investigated for ‘terrorist’ funds if they handle certain accounts. Under such suspicion, the Muslim charity Interpal has had banking facilities suspended several times, though no incriminating evidence was ever found. Interpal was investigated by the Charity Commission in 1996 and 2003 because of accusations of funding Hamas but was cleared on both occasions. Then in 2007 its account was closed by NatWest. In January 2008 Lloyds Bank suspended international clearing facilities by Lloyds for Interpal’s account with the Islamic Bank of Britain, citing pressure from the US authorities over the fact that Interpal has been banned in the USA because of its supposed association with Hamas.⁴ The Palestine Solidarity Campaign as well as HHUGS, which helps Muslim prisoners and immigration detainees, have also had banking facilities withdrawn because bank fear being investigated for indirectly supporting ‘terrorist’ organisations.

The Viva Palestina incident adds to this list of cases which illustrate how so-called ‘anti-terror’ powers are often used to harass peaceful political activities, especially those involving migrants, Muslims or refugees. They are treated as suspect communities through an implied association with terrorism. The mass media report such arrests through the official language of ‘terrorism’, thus colluding with the state.

Under the Terrorism Act 2000, ‘terrorism’ is vaguely defined to encompass any activity which may threaten damage to property in pursuit of political aims. In implementing the law, ‘terrorism’ is effectively defined as resistance to oppressive regimes, especially those allied with the UK. Hamas

is officially banned here as a terrorist organisation, while Israeli terrorism is treated as self-defence. In this country, solidarity activity is persecuted and even criminalised under anti-terror powers. Such powers are used to protect state terrorism by terrorising opponents.

The police attack on the Gaza convoy undermined participation in democratic politics, as George Galloway has rightly said.⁵ More generally, participation in international solidarity activity here is being persecuted in the name of preventing terrorism. Similar powers have also been used against Tamil, Kurdish and Baloch activists, among others.⁶ Indeed, this is a main reason why the state has 'anti-terror' powers, which are not needed to protect the public from violence.

Therefore such powers and their use should be opposed by everyone who supports democratic rights of free expression and association. Solidarity is needed for political and charitable activities which may be targeted in the future.

Note on CAMPACC

The Campaign Against Criminalising Communities (CAMPACC) brings together human rights activists, lawyers, journalists, migrant communities and people targeted by so-called anti-terrorism laws. CAMPACC has been opposing these laws since enactment of the Terrorism Act 2000. Such laws attack basic freedoms of protest, free association and expression. They are used to marginalise migrant and minority communities, curb civil liberties and stifle voices of democratic dissent. Ordinary criminal law is adequate to protect the public from violence.

Notes on text

¹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/lancashire/7890221.stm>; <http://www.vivapalestina.org/>

² 'Galloway seeks inquiry into convoy arrests', *The Guardian*, 21 February, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/feb/21/galloway-viva-palestina-arrests-aid/print>

³ CAMPACC, Terrorising Minority Communities with 'Anti-Terrorism' Powers: their Use and Abuse, Submission to the Privy Council Review of the Anti-Terrorism Crime and Security Act 2001, August 2003, www.campacc.org.uk/ATCSA_consult-final.pdf

⁴ Interpal references: *The Times*, 05.09.08; <http://www.islamictimes.co.uk/content/view/578/39>, <http://www.interpal.info/archives/2112#more-2112>

⁵ According to Galloway's statement of 19 February: 'Anyone with any sense can see that it is in everyone's interest to encourage Britain's Muslim community to engage themselves in democratic politics.... The timing of the operation is seen locally as an attempt to smear and intimidate the Muslim community and I must say they seem to be right. The arrests were clearly deliberately timed for the eve of the departure of the convoy. Photographs of the high-profile snatch on the M65 were immediately fed to the press to maximise the newsworthiness of the smear that was being perpetrated on the convoy.' See www.vivapalestina.org

⁶ Les Levidow, Opposing the UK 'Terrorist' List: Persistence as Resistance, February 2009, www.campacc.org.uk