LL\_Palestine vs UK counter-terror\_final, 05.12.2024

**Palestine activists face the UK’s state of terror:**

**We have been turned into terror suspects**

6 December 2024

Les Levidow

Since October 2023 mass protests have proliferated against Israel’s genocide, resulting in greater police harassment of pro-Palestine activists and journalists. Police have deployed various pretexts about arrestees, e.g. that they made antisemitic comments, disturbed public order, supported proscribed terrorist organizations, ‘encouraged terrorism’, etc. Under the [Criminal Justice Act 2003](https://netpol.org/2014/07/22/abolish-police-bail/), moreover, arrestees have undergone bail conditions such as exclusion zones around protest sites, as already inflicted on many other protesters.

Moreover, the police have used ‘anti-terror’ powers to impose worse punishments, e.g. by detaining arrestees for long periods, raiding their homes, and confiscating their electronic devices, thus turning them into non-persons. Such unjust uses of anti-terror powers should not be surprising, given the political drivers of the UK Terrorism Act 2000. Pro-Palestine activists and journalists have been added to a long-time list of ‘terror suspects’.

Since Starmer’s Labour government began in June 2024, there has been a greater use of counter-terror powers against political activists. An effective resistance needs to understand the state’s strategy, which began in the late 1990s. This article explains the history so that Palestine activists can better resist the intimidation alongside other groups being targeted.

**Activists persecuted under anti-terror powers**

Under UK anti-terror laws, Palestine activists have undergone various punishments without trial, even without or before criminal charges. What grounds were given by the police? Here are some examples:

* Police raided the home and confiscated electronic devices of a prominent journalist, [Asa Winstanley](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uk-counterterrorism-police-raid-home-electronic-intifada-journalist-asa-winstanley). Police mentioned ‘possible offences’ under sections 1 and 2 of the Terrorism Act, relating to suspected ‘encouragement of terrorism’.
* British journalist [Richard Medhurst](https://skwawkbox.org/2024/08/20/british-pro-palestine-journalist-medhurst-arrested-by-police-exploiting-terror-laws/) was arrested when arriving at Heathrow airport. He was held under Schedule 12 of the Terrorism Act 2000, banning ‘support of a proscribed organisation’. He was held for almost twenty-four hours without access to lawyers or even being able to let his family know where he was.
* A [pro-Palestine banner](https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/biased-met-police-arrest-palestine-protesters-holding-image-clear-blue-sky) depicted a dove carrying a key through a breach in Israel’s apartheid wall. A Zionist counter-protester told the police that the clear blue sky referenced the Hamas attack of 7th October 2023, a day that had a clear blue sky. The banner was duly confiscated. The banner-holders were arrested for supposedly supporting Hamas and underwent bail conditions imposing an exclusion zone for several months.
* [Haim Bresheeth](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/uk-police-arrest-israeli-academic-haim-bresheeth-speech-pro-palestine-demonstration) gave an October 2024 speech including the comment, ‘Israel cannot defeat Hamas or Hizbollah’. Afterwards he was arrested on suspicion of supporting a 'proscribed organisation'.
* [Tony Greenstein](https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/1/17/israels-war-on-gaza-triggered-a-war-on-free-speech-in-the-west) circulated a tweet saying, ‘I support the Palestinian resistance’, and ‘I support Hamas against the Israeli army’ in December 2023. A month later he was arrested for supporting a proscribed organisation. In November 2024 he was charged. So far this has been a rare criminal charge against pro-Palestine activists merely for speech acts (but see below the case of Samina Malik).
* For several years the [Palestine Action](https://palestineaction.org/) network has been damaging the facilities and equipment of Elbit Systems, which make components for drones used by the Israeli military. In late 2024 [increasing numbers](https://www.thecanary.co/uk/news/2024/11/19/palestine-action-counter-terror-elbit/) of their activists were arrested under anti-terror powers. In some cases, family members and roommates were expelled from their own homes for up to three days. The network responded, ‘The only terrorists here are those assisting and arming Israel’s genocide.’

The above pattern indicates a general aim to intimidate political activists. Under anti-terror powers, executive punishments can be imposed without or before criminal prosecutions.



**Migrant communities persecuted**

Those anti-terror powers have had diverse political targets since the Terrorism Act 2000. Many individuals have been prosecuted merely for speech acts, as in the 2007 case of a poem by [Samina Malik](https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/dec/06/terrorism.books). In general the political targets have been protests against UK allies, especially state-terrorist regimes in the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent, e.g. in Israel, Turkiye, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, etc. The UK has proscribed some opposition groups there as terrorist, in turn as a basis to intimidate and even criminalise UK migrant groups from those places.

Here is a recent escalation: On 27th November 2024 counter-terror police raided Haringey’s Kurdish Community Centre and said that it would remain closed for two weeks pending a search. In parallel the counter-terror police raided the homes of key individuals, smashed down their doors and detained them. The official pretext was suspicion that they were supporting the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which was proscribed in 2001 under the Terrorism Act 2000.

A group of people holding signs

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Kurdish protest in Westminster against ‘anti-terror’ raids of 27 November 2024

Since 2001 UK Kurdish and other organizations had been demanding that the UK delist the PKK on several grounds. In particular, its proscription

* provides special repressive powers to persecute Kurdish community activists;
* encourages the Turkish regime to label its Kurdish opposition as terrorist, thus normalising its daily war against them; and so
* impedes a peaceful resolution of Turkey’s conflict with its Kurdish population.

After the 27 November raids, UK Kurdish organizations again demanded delisting of the PKK. For details, see this Labour Hub [article](https://labourhub.org.uk/2024/11/29/kurdish-community-demand-decriminalisation-after-violent-police-attacks/), ‘Kurdish Community demand decriminalisation after violent police attacks’; also Lida Kayhko’s interview on [Novara Media](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DpbfvBxiqJI), 30.11.2024. For longer-term updates, see: social media of the [Kurdish People’s Democratic Assembly](https://x.com/kurdishassembly). Its main demands were turned into a [public petition](https://www.change.org/p/stop-the-persecution-of-kurdish-political-activists-in-the-uk) to the government. Also [Hands Off Kurds](https://www.handsoffkurds.com)

Thanks to the  people’s resistance, the police removed the blockage on the KCC on 5th December; see [video](https://anfenglishmobile.com/news/resistance-in-london-police-occupation-ended-barricades-removed-76682) of the celebration.

**Creating ‘terrorist’ crimes, punishable without trial**

For a long time, terrorism was commonly understood as violent threats to ordinary people. By contrast, under the UK Terrorism Act 2000, terrorism was defined more broadly than before. Terrorist crimes include ‘the threat’ of ‘serious damage to property’, in ways ‘designed to influence the government’ for a ‘political cause’.

That broad definition would encompass the entire history of working-class and anti-colonial revolt. It would also encompass peace movement actions damaging jet fighter planes which were due for export to commit war crimes, as in a [1996 action against British Aerospace](https://www.citizenshandbook.org/hammered.html). Those historical analogies highlight the law’s broad scope for protecting terrorist regimes abroad by stigmatising and persecuting their opponents here.

Under the UK Terrorism Act 2000, organizations anywhere could be (and have been) banned on the basis that their activities fit the broad definition. In 2001 the first proscription list included organizations which were truly terrorist in the conventional sense (e.g. Al Qaeda) as well as national liberation groups. Moreover, any vague association with such groups, e.g. displaying their symbols or speaking at the same event, became a terrorist crime. These powers have been applied politically by the police counter-terror unit, Crown Prosecution Service and judiciary.

To investigate suspected crimes or persons, the Act authorised strong executive powers for the police. They can impose 28-day detentions without charge, or indefinitely pending deportation for people who are not UK nationals (virtual kidnapping). They can confiscate property as an instrument or evidence of terrorist intent. Border authorities can question travellers for up to 6 hours at any port, where failure to answer all questions is a terrorist crime. While investigating a charity, the Charity Commission can order its bank to freeze its account; this punishment was inflicted twice on [Interpal](https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06778/SN06778.pdf).

In effect, these are punishments without trial or even without criminal charge. Prime targets have been political activists who criticise UK foreign policy, especially its support for repressive regimes such as Israel, Turkiye, Pakistan or Sri Lanka. The anti-terror regime created a permanent state of terror against political dissent and solidarity.

**Creating what ‘terror suspects’?**

It may not be obvious why the UK government sought comprehensive, permanent anti-terror powers in the late 1990s, shortly after Tony Blair’s New Labour government had begun in 1997 but before the 9/11 attacks in 2001. As background: The 1974 Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) had been designed to terrorise Irish people into silence about Britain’s terrorist crimes in Northern Ireland and to turn some into police informers. For many years, the Irish were persecuted as a [suspect community](https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745307268/suspect-community/). By the late 1990s the PTA could no longer be justified, given the 1993 Downing Street Agreement and the ensuing peace process.

The Terrorism Act 2000 addressed a different problem, as explained by Prof. [Paul Wilkinson](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/aug/18/paul-wilkinson-obituary): ‘A terrorist group looks internationally for any ideological, political or diplomatic support it can manage to obtain. Sub-state terrorism is typically the weapon of the weak’. The quote comes from his 1998 report to Parliament, justifying the Bill that became the Terrorism Act 2000.

Wilkinson was a favourite academic of UK securocrats. He was addressing the problem that the UK’s allies were being contested by national liberation movements or other violent movements, which had symbolic support from within this country, especially solidarity groups and migrant groups from the relevant countries. This support caused problems for UK relations with those regimes.

At the 2001 public meeting that opposed the Terrorism Act 2000, Tony Benn MP analysed its political aim:

[The ‘anti-terror’ framework is ] an agreement among the governments of the world that no government is to be challenged from inside with support from outside. It is little to do with ‘terrorism’. In a global economy Britain wants to trade with repressive regimes. And if they find that these regimes are complaining – that there are people in London campaigning for Kurdish rights, for Tamil rights or for Kashmiri rights – then the British government is expected to respond.

Indeed, under the Terrorism Act 2000, in 2001 the government banned 20+ organizations including the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and Tamil Tigers. Hamas was added later that year. The proscription list initially included Hizbollah’s military wing and later added its political wing in 2019.

Of course those organizations never existed in the UK. No matter, the state has used the bans to persecute people here as supporters of a terrorist organization or more vaguely as ‘terror suspects’. This category has provided a basis for punishment without trial and then sometimes prosecutions.

**UK anti-terror regime internalizes state-terrorist alliances**

Given that political basis and motive of the British state, anti-terror powers:

* define terrorism more broadly than the common-sense concept of violence against people;
* blur any distinction between anti-government protest and organized violence against civilians;
* label numerous organisations as ‘terrorist', as a basis for placing entire communities under suspicion of associating with ‘terrorism';
* detain and prosecute people for suspected activities which could just as well be handled under other laws;
* cast a wide net for treating more people as ‘terror suspects’; and
* undermine struggles for national self-determination against oppressive regimes.

Even before 9/11, and especially since then, the UK’s allies have regularly branded their internal opposition as terrorist, while portraying their own role as counter-terror. The UK anti-terror regime has legitimised that narrative. It persecutes any symbolic support here for resistance abroad (‘sub-state terrorism’), or activities here which pose ‘a threat to property’, or simply verbal opposition to the UK’s state-terrorist alliances.

A logo with people in a circle

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Protest against the ongoing criminalization campaign since the Terrorism Act 2000

Anti-terror powers have fostered a racist culture of suspicion towards migrant groups and Muslims, treating them as suspect communities. (See below reports by CAMPACC and Cage; also this [report](https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/8735/) comparing the Irish and Muslims as suspect communities.) This politics of fear has helped to intimidate dissent and so shield the government's foreign policies from criticism.

To counter the intimidation two decades ago, the resistance campaign raised the ironic slogan, ‘We are all terror suspects’. T-shirts with the slogan expressed overt defiance against the state terror campaign. Tony Blair’s photo appeared in the publicity version (see photo below), though not on the t-shirts.

**Palestine activists too have become terror suspects: what collective action?**

Since October 2023, the UK government has faced greater mass protest against its complicity with Israel’s genocide. Like its predecessor governments, Starmer’s Labour government has lacked a credible justification for its complicity. It has been treating the Palestine solidarity movement as yet another suspect community. We have been turned into terror suspects who warrant punishment without trial and sometimes prosecution. This attack extends the previous pattern since the Terrorism Act 2000.

Therefore the threat runs more deeply than ‘abuse’ of anti-terror powers. The problem is the entire counter-terror regime. Prime targets today include the Kurdish freedom movement and the Palestine solidarity movement. They had close solidaristic relationships during the 1970s-1990s, especially in the Middle East. But less so today, resulting partly from political changes there and internal divisions within each national movement. An article by [Elif Genc](https://merip.org/2020/08/the-kurdish-movements-relationship-with-the-palestinian-struggle/) analysed the earlier and potential solidarity, as well as recent obstacles; more analyses will be necessary to clarify ways forward.

It is necessary to unite all the people who are unjustly targeted. Such unity is important especially for the Kurdish and Palestinian solidarity movements. What collective action can embolden defiance and weaken the counter-terror regime?



T-shirt was sold by CAMPACC until stocks ran out around 2008

**Reports** two decades after the Terrorism Act 2000

CAMPACC, *20 Years of Terrorism Acts – 20 Years of Injustice*

<http://campacc.org.uk/uploads/CAMPACC-20%20YEARS%20OF%20TACT%20_v3%2010609.pdf>

Cage,  *20 Years of TACT:* *20 Years of Injustice*

<https://www.cage.ngo/20-years-of-tact-justice-under-threat-report>

**Author’s bio note:**

In 2001 the author helped to found the Campaign Against Criminalising Communities (CAMPACC), which has opposed the Terrorism Act 2000 and then subsequent legislation, as described on the website, <http://campacc.org.uk/> In 2018 he helped to found Jewish Network for Palestine (JNP) and remains a member of its Steering Group. He has been an anti-Zionist activist since the 1980s.

This article expands his talk at a 22 November 2024 webinar, described in the article, “370 heard journalists & Palestine solidarity activists who have been arrested for taking action against Elbit & supporting the victims of Israel's genocide”. See Tony Greenstein’s article and recording here,

<https://azvsas.blogspot.com/2024/11/we-will-not-be-silenced-by-police-abuse.html>