

Britain's Barbaric Terror Strategy

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Here we have the three Ds – destitution, detention and, finally, deportation

By Yasmin Alibhai-Brown

(source: The Independent)

Last week a British ship returned from Brazil after it was found to be carrying 1,400 tons of noxious waste to be dumped there. The Environment Agency says the UK does not allow the transfer of volatile rubbish to pollute poorer nations. That is the official position. The truth is that it still happens unless there is a furor, as there was with the Brazilian authorities. Sending thorny problems abroad is a long and hearty tradition. In the glory days of empire, subject nations were used and misused to sustain the industrial might of the ruling power. Troublesome people too were banished to distant shores.

From the late 18th century prisoners – many innocent or guilty only of trivial offences against the rich – were pushed off to Australia. Today, our declared war on terror has led to suspects – including British citizens – being held and tortured in Middle Eastern prisons, and many Muslims who have been tried in our courts and acquitted are forcibly returned to their countries of origin. Nobody cares. All Muslims are, these days, assumed to have anti-western toxins coursing in their hot blood.

On the day the ship came back from Brazil, two Pakistani men studying in Britain went back home to face an uncertain future. They were among the 12 students arrested in Liverpool and Manchester by the security services who claimed the men were planning an al-Qai'da bombing spree in the UK. It was a spectacular round-up which delivered no convictions. Not one of the men arrested was charged. The evidence presented against them was laughably flimsy, except no one is laughing. Instead of being released, however, they were returned to the cells and told they would be sent packing. Why? "Visa irregularities," apparently. Some tried to appeal against the decision, but most have given up the battle. Held without charge for over 140 days so far, they have to agree to leave or forcibly be put on planes.

Honourable chaps like David Miliband, Jack Straw and Gordon Brown make stirring speeches on the rule of law and ethical conduct. Unofficially, the policy of D&D – detain and deport– is now used as a matter of course to rid the country of targeted Muslims whether guilty or patently innocent. (You could even say that the return of al-Megrahi to Libya has stopped a public inquiry and the mess that might have spilled out.) I have no problems with the removal of proven villains. The notorious Omar Bakri was packed off to the Lebanon and is thankfully no longer inciting hatred here, and the Law Lords have ruled that Abu Qatada, another firebrand cleric, can be sent back to Jordan which has been seeking his extradition. But when D&D is used as a matter of course by politicians and our security agencies against those they cannot nail, it is both vindictive and immoral.

The US uses the same weapon. Youssef Megahed, an Egyptian student accused of being involved in a bomb plot, was cleared this April. He was immediately re-arrested for a minor immigration transgression and was due to be deported. An immigration judge has, this month, thrown out the case and returned Megahed's future to him. The Washington Post has revealed that in some cases, returnees are drugged with anti-psychotic substances before they are put on planes, some are comatose and in wheelchairs.

Remember the dramatic operation to protect our airports from a massive terrorist attack? What happened to all those who were netted? Were they exonerated? And were the non-Britons among them packed off? Or the thrilling ricin plot when nine men were accused of making the poison in their flat? Blair cited the arrests to create panic in Britain in the run-up to the Iraq war; Colin Powell used the arrests to whip up American public support for that illegal adventure. Oh! It turned out there was no ricin, no laboratory, and no plot. One of the men stabbed a police officer and deservedly went down, but the rest were freed. They were then marked for deportation to countries with no respect for human rights.

Between September 2001 and March 2009, of the 1,500 arrests made, only 14 per cent have been convicted. Immigration laws are used to punish many of the freed. The Home Secretary has the power to do this if he or she believes the acquitted are "not conducive to the public good". The authoritarian Iranian regime would understand such reasoning perfectly. Iranians we deported to Tehran are in prison for the same reason we got rid of them.

UK judges are now stepping in to protect the accused. Mohamed Asha, a Jordanian doctor, was cleared of the Glasgow and London bomb plots. So what? He was put on the deportation list and has just been saved from that fate by a judge. One of the worst cases was that of Hicham Yezza, a member of staff of Nottingham University who was arrested in 2008 for downloading a document on al-Qai'da from an official US government website. Interrogated, frightened and threatened he was eventually released only to be re-arrested and served with a deportation order to Algeria, now revoked.

The countries receiving back some of the returnees are known for extreme interrogation techniques and imprisonment without trial. In 2005, Tony Blair and Colonel Gaddafi started secret talks to arrange for the deportation of "suspected" Libyans from Britain. One can barely imagine what happened to them next. Professor Nigel Rodley, a UN special investigator, has expressed concern that in their zeal to get rid of alleged terrorists our government may be stamping on legitimate human rights. Shocking? Yes, and it is happening in our own backyards.

The crude and dastardly tactic is used against asylum-seekers, too, again before they can argue their cases properly. Here we have three Ds – destitution, detention and deportation, a policy not openly debated in our mother of parliaments, but one that is quietly established in the interests of the increasingly paranoid state. The government didn't get its 42 days and has settled on a pernicious substitute. This time there is no outcry, no campaign against such undemocratic, autocratic governmental interventions. Like the silent ships carrying away our lethal rubbish, Britons prefer not to know. These isles are cleansed of filth and suspect foreigners. So what's the big deal?

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