

How young Muslims are paying the price for their protests against Israeli atrocities in the Gaza Conflict.

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Background

The Gaza conflict may have only lasted 22 days but its impact was one that has had far reaching consequences around the world. Not only did it lead to the ground-breaking Goldstone Report, hailed by many as the first real international attempt to hold Israel accountable for its actions in the region, but it also inflamed passionate public emotions and discourse across the globe. A rash of protests, marches, rallies and demonstrations against the Israeli aggression could be found in countries from Spain to America, and London was no exception. Within hours of the first Israeli air strikes against the civilian Gazan population, anti-war groups and other interested parties had arranged what was to be the first of many demonstrations, vigils and protests.

Muslims and non-Muslims alike, Arabs and non-Arabs, took to the streets to voice their horror and united opposition to the Israeli bombardment of the most populated region in the world.

However, many young protesters are now beginning to pay the price for their opposition to that conflict. Yesterday and today, 29th and 30th October 2009, many of those who took part in the London demonstrations were hauled before the West London Magistrates Court in Hammersmith. This included demonstrators who protested in the events on Sunday 28th December and Monday 29th December, both outside the Israeli embassy as well as the 3rd and 10th January.

Those young people, many of whom were attending their first ever demonstration, faced very severe consequences for their roles in that December/January opposition to the Israeli offensive.

As a result of the protests, primarily of the 3rd and 10th January, in the last two days alone 69 people have been charged with criminal offences. The primary charge, which applied to 61 out of the 69 cases were for violent disorder. Of all of the arrests made, judging from the names alone, almost all were young Muslim men.



Under the European Convention on Human Rights people must be free to exercise their democratic right to protest and express their opposition and dissent, whether it is against the policies of national governments or any other. However, there seems to be a pattern emerging in Britain of particularly heavy handed tactics being employed in the cases of young Muslims.

From the point of their overly rough treatment on the days of the protests themselves, (a pattern currently being investigated by several human rights organisations) to the stages of arrest and then to the stages of charging and sentencing, a policy of discrimination and excessiveness seems to be developing.

A few of the areas of police over reaction and judicial heavy handedness when it comes to the treatment of Muslim protestors are set out below.

Dawn Raids

Many of the accused were arrested in a series of dawn raids. Within minutes of arriving at the Magistrates Court this morning (30 October), MEMO representatives were told by several people how they had been subjected to terrifying dawn ambushes. One teenager told a MEMO representative how his house was raided at 4 am when two of the solid front doors to his house were smashed in and he was surrounded by about 40 police officers as he slept. Later a MEMO contact was also informed that another teenager had reportedly been surrounded by 25 police officers who broke into his home and surrounded him. Naturally these and other similar instances have left many families within the Muslim community very shaken and nervous.

Considering the fact that many of these individuals had been pulled to the side by police on the day of the protest and had freely given their names and addresses to them while being filmed by police officers, this seems like a very heavy handed tactic. Police raids should surely be reserved for only the most serious kinds of offenders, ones who are a public threat or a danger to the police themselves, but not for a teenager who had thrown his shoes during a protest. Furthermore, many of these raids happened months after the protests themselves and so were already completely unexpected.

Intimidation outside the court room

One MEMO contact outside the court room reported how, even as many of the accused waited to go into court, they were approached by officers who served them orders under S62 of the Immigration Act and warned them that the outcome of their cases could affect their immigration status, which could be



revoked as a result of the court proceedings. Many onlookers in the courthouse felt that this was a further intimidation tactic used to frighten the protesters even more than they already had been.

Charges

The charges of violent disorder are extremely serious and carry a potentially large custodial sentence of up to five years. While such heavy charges are undoubtedly warranted in some cases, in others, where the extent of the acts may have been spitting or the tossing of a shoe, the charges seem exceptionally severe. Given the fact that a large majority of the accused were teenagers who had never been in trouble before, it seems that lesser charges may have been more suitable in some cases.

Surrender your passports.

The magistrate presiding over the cases repeated on several occasions that the cases before him clearly have “an international element” and on those grounds, in almost every case, he imposed conditions that the accused had to surrender their passports to their local police station within 48 hours and were not to travel without applying to the court for permission first.

It was felt by some in the courthouse, that this was an overly cautious condition to impose. For young Muslim’s who are of no risk to the public, had not demonstrated any propensity to be a flight risk and some of whom are currently university students, there seems to be no reason to have applied these stringent conditions, which probably would not have been made had they been white, English men sitting in the dock.

In each hearing that the MEMO representatives attended, the Magistrate declined jurisdiction on the grounds that “missiles” had been thrown and he subsequently referred each case on to the Isleworth Crown Court.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the police have a very important job to do and that they play a vital role in maintaining public order and that especially at events such as these where tensions and passions are already running high, their role is vital. Their job is not just to keep the public safe from the protesters, but also to keep the protesters themselves safe.

However, in an already tense political atmosphere where Islamophobia is a growing concern, it is vital that the police and the judiciary are seen to be dealing with young Muslims in an even handed manner.



However, it is clearly being currently perceived by some that this is not the case. Many seem to feel that the reason for the heavy handed tactics of the police and the judiciary are ones of intimidation. The message is being sent out loud and clear, that protesting and attending marches runs the risk of resulting in a hefty prison sentence. We must also look at the allegations of violent disorder in the context of the clashes that took place between the police and protestors at each event and in which many protestors felt that they were being provoked to react in a violent manner.

Many people have been shaken up by the passing of months and then sudden dawn raids by dozens of police officers, the weighty charges, the stringent bail conditions and the out of court warnings regarding immigration status revocation.

It is important that young Muslims feel empowered to be able to speak out and protest and campaign for change. There is no doubt that they must do this in a lawful and peaceful manner and it is right that when the law is breached they should be tried and, if found guilty, sentenced in a court of law, but this process must be seen to apply equally across the board and cannot be seen to be one applied in a discriminatory manner against young Muslims.

MEMO has learnt that a joint defense campaign is currently being organised by groups such as the British Muslim Initiative, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Stop the War Coalition, the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and the Palestine Forum of Britain, to try to assist the accused in their defense as at the moment many of them seem to be lacking the support they need. A few of the defendants said that they had not even seen the alleged CCTV evidence against them or seen copies of their earlier recorded statements.

