

Hundreds take to the streets to oppose counter-terrorism police raids on Turkish Kurds in London

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Violent dawn raids and arrests of seven people in north London accused of supporting the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) have sparked a furious response from Kurdish workers.

The PKK is a nationalist group of Turkish Kurds that once sought an independent state in southeast Turkey but now seeks greater autonomy and cultural rights. In 2013, the PKK signalled its willingness to negotiate and called off its armed struggle, ending a bitter 30-year-long civil war that had claimed the lives of 40,000 people and displaced hundreds of thousands of villagers.

Nevertheless, as a movement with affiliates in Iraq, Iran and Syria, the PKK has become a significant political-military force in the Middle East in the last decade, on the basis of close cooperation with the US.

Its sister party in Syria, the People's Protection Unit (YPG) and Syria Democratic Forces (SDF), set up an autonomous state, Rojava, with backing from the Pentagon. This prompted a furious response from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who feared the move would reignite demands for a separate Kurdish state in Turkey. As a result, hostilities have continued sporadically, with NATO member Turkey carrying out air strikes and ground invasions in Iraq and Syria to root out PKK supporters.

Under the Act, "terrorism" may simply include "the threat" of "serious damage to property", in ways "designed to influence the government" for a "political cause". This broad definition blurs any distinction between military, political and civilian targets. Organisations can be banned on the basis that their activities anywhere fit this broad, vague definition of "terrorism".

The legislation makes it a crime to give verbal or symbolic support to a banned organisation, or even to host a meeting with a speaker from such an organisation. It also allows police to detain terrorist suspects for questioning for up to seven days, in a significant break with the centuries-long maximum of 24 hours.

Last Wednesday, the Metropolitan Police arrested four men and two women at separate addresses during dawn raids, and another man later in the day. All are yet to be charged. According to the Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism Command, those arrested had been under investigation for terrorist activity that it believed was linked to the PKK. Undermining its own case, the Met admitted they constituted no imminent threat to the public.

The police said the Kurdish Community Centre, in Haringey, north London, would remain closed for up to two weeks as part of its investigation into the PKK.

Kurdish community groups demanded the "immediate release of those detained", calling the arrests an "affront to the principles of democracy, justice, and human rights that the UK claims to hold". On Wednesday, hours after the arrests, more than 100 people took to the streets of Haringey in north London--the heart of the UK's 200,000-strong Turkish community that includes Turks, Turkish Cypriots and Turkish Kurds--chanting "shame on you" at police.

Seeking to stop the police carrying out further raids in the area, they blocked off the main road nearby and gathered in protest outside the community centre in Haringey that the police had barricaded and occupied. They tried to pass the police cordons, resulting in clashes with officers and the arrest of eight of the

protesters.

Ishak Milani, co-chair of the Kurdish People's Assembly in the UK, an advocacy group based at the Kurdish Community Centre in Haringey, said: "We, the Kurdish community in London, strongly condemn the recent unjust and heavy-handed raid conducted by British police on our community spaces," and added, "We demand accountability for this raid and a clear explanation for the actions taken."

Milani explained, "We woke up in shock, because the UK police attacked our friends, our political activists. They arrested six of them and raided our community centre, which is really important to us." He added that police had raided the centre almost on the same date last year: "We are really worried about today. Last year, during our celebrations, they raided our community centre and attacked us."

The *Guardian* reported that one man had said he had been staying at his sister's house when she was arrested. "At 3 o'clock in the morning, I was staying at my sister's house. They broke the door down, I thought it was a robbery. I've never seen police like this, they didn't look like Metropolitan Police. They covered their face."

Such was the violence that he required stitches on his forehead. He explained, "I ran into my sister's bedroom. I closed the door then they broke it and they broke my face. Half an hour later, they took me to hospital. Blood was coming down my hand and my face. My sister was scared. They called the ambulance and arrested her. I don't know where she is now."

Gik-Der, another Kurdish community group, said: "[Kurds] who had to migrate to Europe from Turkey, where the Kurdish people's right to life and existence is denied, are now being subjected to attacks and criminalisation attempts in Britain. The Labour Party government, which continues to increase its political, financial, diplomatic and military relations with the fascist [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan, is attacking the organised presence of Kurds living in Britain as a requirement and continuation of this relationship."

Another protest took place near the community centre on Thursday and led to one man being arrested for allegedly voicing support for the PKK.

On Saturday, several hundred people marched from Trafalgar Square to the seat of government, Whitehall,

with some holding placards reading "Stop the attacks on Kurds" and "Hands off our community centre". The protesters, with many wearing face coverings, blew whistles, chanted and played music as they marched.

The Met had set out strict rules for the protest, demanding it finish by 4.30 p.m. and disperse by 5 p.m. It warned those attending that expressing support for the PKK is a criminal offence

A Kurdish community spokesperson said that the police attacks had to be seen against a backdrop of repression that had been mounting. The spokesperson said, "For a number of years there has been pressure on the community centre from the Charity Commission. It was under pressure due to its recognition of the Kurdish national freedom struggle." Britain was supporting Turkey's efforts to suppress the Kurds, with the Turkish government pressuring other governments to "stop any support and any tolerance of Kurdish issues".

Far from being a response to alleged terrorism, the police's heavy-handed tactics are aimed at intimidating people and crushing all dissent to its support for war, austerity and assaults on democratic rights, by targeting a vulnerable immigrant community.

Both governments have overseen an increase in the use of counter-terror legislation to harass, intimidate and charge journalists, protesters and political activists opposed to the objectives of British imperialism.

The protests to oppose and prevent further police operations are a significant political response to the continual scapegoating of immigrants and asylum seekers by the ruling elite and its parties.



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