

Australia: Anti-Muslim “terror plot” unravels

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Two weeks ago, at the height of a media witchhunt over a sermon delivered by a Sydney-based Islamic cleric, Murdoch newspapers around the country ran front-page headlines declaring that three Australian Muslims arrested in Yemen last month had been part of a “terror plot” to bomb one of Sydney’s underground train stations, Kings Cross.

As the Murdoch outlets, working hand in glove with the Howard government and its state Labor counterparts, seized upon the comments by Sheik Taj Din al-Hilali to slander Muslims as defenders of rape, they also sought to whip up an hysterical campaign about young Muslim men becoming “home-grown terrorists”.

Like the inflammatory crusade against Hilali, the purpose of the “terrorist” claims was to incite anti-Muslim prejudice and to stir up a climate of fear and uncertainty. Howard needs such terror threats to justify his support for the fraudulent “war on terror” which is the pretext for deeply unpopular policies, in particular Australian participation in the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq.

If the chances of a terrorist attack have increased in Australia, the Howard government is directly responsible through its support for the criminal activities of the US in the Middle East and Central Asia.

The latest “terror plot”, however, quickly began to unravel. On October 31, the front pages of the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* and other Murdoch tabloids screamed: “Osama’s mentor trained Aussies”.

The newspapers belatedly reported the arrests in Yemen on October 16 of three Australian Muslims, accused of plotting to smuggle small arms to Somalia. They were two young students—Mohammed Ayub, 18, and his brother Adbullah Ayub, 20—and a 35-year-old Polish-born web-designer, Marek Samulski.

According to the *Telegraph*, “high level sources involved in the arrests” said the Ayub brothers were studying under Osama bin Laden’s “mentor”, Sheik Abdul Majid al-Zindani, at his Al-Iman University in the capital of Sanaa. It soon emerged that they were studying

at a different university in another city.

This did not stop the *Telegraph*. Two days later, on November 2, its headline was “Kings Cross terror plot”. It claimed the Ayub brothers were “suspected al-Qaeda terrorists” who had been “under observation over a suicide bomb plot to blow up Sydney’s King Cross railway station.”

Citing unidentified “authorities”, the newspaper provided graphic details: “The plot was three months in the making before it was foiled last year by ASIO [Australian Security Intelligence Organisation] and NSW and Federal counter-terrorism police. Authorities believed the men were linked to plotters stockpiling a range of chemicals including acetone, known as ‘Mother of Satan’, an explosive precursor used in the London bombings.”

Within hours these alarming allegations—which were also highly prejudicial to the detainees in Yemen—proved totally false. Concerned by the prospect of commuter panic, NSW police counter-terrorism commander, Assistant Commissioner Nick Kaldas, called a press conference to brand the reports a “beatup”. There was “no imminent threat” to the train system and “no need for alarm,” he declared.

All the circumstances surrounding the Yemen arrests remain murky. Altogether, local security forces rounded up 15 Yemenis and eight foreigners. No charges have been laid against them, and under Yemen’s draconian laws they can be held for three months without trial. The only alleged terrorist connection is a statement by a Yemeni Interior Ministry official who said: “Preliminary investigations indicate that they are members of al-Qaeda.”

Without waiting for any evidence, Prime Minister John Howard and his ministers immediately claimed that the arrests provided disturbing new proof that “home-grown” terrorists were preparing attacks in Australia. Howard told parliament: “If they have broken the law or been involved in terrorism, well they deserve everything they get.”

Treasurer Peter Costello insisted that local Muslim

“jihadists” were pushing a “culture of death”. He told the *Telegraph*: “You look around Australia, a terrorist will see a target wherever there are innocent people.” Addressing the National Press Club, ASIO director-general Paul O’Sullivan weighed in, saying it was “a shock to see that there are home-grown people who would like to do harm in this country.”

Media reports indicated that ASIO instigated the Yemen arrests by “tipping off” the local agencies. Adam Houda, the Sydney lawyer representing the Ayub family, also accused ASIO of targeting the two sons, who were questioned before they left Australia three years ago. ASIO officers interviewed their mother Rabiah Hutchison, who lives in Sydney, just a month before her sons were detained.

Speaking through a lawyer, Hutchinson denied she or her sons were terrorists or had trained at terrorist camps. The media, however, denounced her as the former wife of Abdul Rahim Ayub, an Indonesian whom ASIO has accused of establishing an Australian branch of the Indonesian terrorist group, Jemaah Islamiah, in Australia during the late 1990s. Hutchison cannot travel overseas because the Howard government confiscated her passport last year on “security” grounds, acting on ASIO advice.

According to the media, Hutchison also “has links” to the 19 Islamic men arrested in Sydney and Melbourne a year ago on terrorist charges, because her daughter from her first marriage, Rahmah, is married to Khaled Cheikho, one of those arrested. Apart from fuelling the xenophobic witchhunt against Muslims, the “Yemen plot” could be an attempt to breathe new life into the campaign generated around those arrests.

More than a year has passed since November 2, 2005, when Howard suddenly called a media conference to declare that a “potential terrorist threat” made it necessary to rush “urgent” parts of last year’s Anti-Terrorism Bill through parliament within a day. A week later, 850 heavily-armed police and intelligence personnel burst into homes in Sydney and Melbourne in the pre-dawn hours. More than 12 months on, many basic questions remain unanswered about these arrests—the 19 arrested men are still in isolation cells awaiting trial, and the evidence against them is largely unknown and untested.

Howard’s dramatic announcement sought to silence the opposition that had erupted to the police-state measures that he and the Labor leaders had agreed to. The joint federal-state legislation provided that anyone could be convicted of terrorism offences without evidence of a specific plot or target, outlawed “advocating” terrorism

and introduced two new forms of detention without trial—“preventative detention” and “control orders” (which can include house arrest). The laws also criminalised urging support for resistance to Australian military forces—opening the way for prosecutions of opponents of neo-colonial interventions such as those in Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor and Solomon Islands.

The WSWS is not in a position to judge the allegations made in Yemen. Ever since the 2000 bombing of the USS Cole in Aden port, which killed 19 US servicemen and was claimed by Al Qaeda, Yemen’s government has been under intense pressure from the US, Britain and other Western governments. Like many others around the world, President Ali Abdullah Saleh then joined the “war on terror” after September 11, 2001 and sought to exploit it politically. This year alone, Yemen’s security forces have carried out numerous highly-publicised roundups of accused terrorists, often based on dubious evidence. Just last week, a Yemeni appeals court acquitted 19 suspected Al Qaeda members on terrorism charges, while convicting six on lesser counts of possessing forged documents

Whatever the truth of the Yemen affair, the aim of the “Kings Cross plot” is clear. It was the latest in a ceaseless series of efforts to re-stoke the “war on terror” and stir anti-Muslim prejudice. Just days before the Kings Cross headlines, the Murdoch tabloids ran front-page stories alleging that this summer’s Ashes cricket series against England was a terrorist target. When that claim threatened ticket sales, Australian Federal Police commissioner Mick Keelty warned newspapers to back off bogus reporting. Another recent report, about terrorists planning to hijack a goods train to steal explosives, proved equally false.

Even though these particularly crude claims have backfired, the Howard government requires a continual stream of “terror threats” to legitimise the bogus “war on terrorism” which provides the ideological justification for its policies at home and abroad. Under the aegis of the fight against “terrorism”, Howard fully backed the Bush administration’s criminal occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, launched his own neo-colonial operations in the Pacific and made deep inroads into basic democratic rights.



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