

Australia: Media promotes sensationalised “terror” claims

Mike Head
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Despite scant police evidence, the Australian media has universally depicted five Muslim men arrested on August 4 in the course of extensive police raids as guilty of an extraordinary plot to attack an army base. For days on end, the public has been fed hysterical headlines, such as “Somali extremists on a ‘fatwa order’ from God,” assisting the security agencies and the Labor government of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to whip up fresh fears of terrorism.

Five Lebanese- and Somali-born men have been charged with offences under the country’s sweeping anti-terror laws, including “conspiring to prepare for a terrorist act”. Police allege the men planned to storm the Holsworthy army base in southwestern Sydney with automatic weapons in a suicide mission, seeking to kill as many military personnel as possible before they themselves were killed.

However, while police commanders and the media both claimed that an attack on the base was imminent, the police raids reportedly found no guns, let alone automatic weapons. Moreover, the man accused of paying a visit to the Holsworthy base in March, Wissam Mahmoud Fattal, had been in police custody since April 1, on unrelated assault charges.

Apart from “conspiracy”—a notoriously vague charge that requires no proof of any actual conduct, only conversations—two of the men are charged with either “preparing” to travel to Somalia, their homeland, or helping another man travel there to “engage in hostile activities”. Under the draconian anti-terror laws introduced since 2001, it is a crime to support activities directed against any foreign government as well as against federal or state Australian governments.

When he appeared in court to be charged, Fattal angrily denied the allegations. “You call us terrorists. That’s not true. I’ve never killed anyone in my life,” he declared. Instead he accused the Australian army of killing “innocent people in Afghanistan and Iraq” and said Israel had taken land by force from the Palestinians. All five men have been denied bail and will not re-appear in court until October 26.

Heavily-armed members of the 400-strong federal-state police and intelligence taskforce raided additional homes across Melbourne’s working class suburbs on August 5, bringing the total to more than 22, yet no new arrests were reported. Meanwhile, more sensational claims appeared in newspapers, all attributed to unnamed police sources.

In the *Australian*, associate editor Cameron Stewart reported that police believed one of the arrested men had been seen near another military base, at Puckapunyal, north of Melbourne. This claim was featured throughout the media—even though the police admitted that the evidence would not be taken to court because they were “unable to prove the visit had sinister overtones”.

According to another story by Stewart, “police believe members of an alleged Melbourne terror cell have been providing funding to the militant extremist group al-Shabaab in Somalia”. This allegation will not be tested in court either. Stewart conceded that “the amounts involved were small and convictions would be difficult to obtain, given that al-Shabaab is not listed in Australia as a terrorist organisation.”

In fact, Al-Shabaab is an insurgent movement that controls parts of Somalia and is widely regarded by Somalis as a legitimate resistance force against the US-backed invasion, led by the Ethiopian military in December 2006 (see: Somali-Americans subjected to first Obama “terror” prosecution).

The leaking of unsubstantiated police claims, customary during the former Howard government’s “anti-terror” operations, has marked this one from the outset. The August 4 dawn raids were timed to fit with a front-page “exclusive” prepared by Stewart, who had been supplied in advance with detailed information about the operation and the allegations against the men.

The Murdoch newspapers have been in the forefront of the media campaign. In its August 5 editorial, the Melbourne *Herald Sun* tabloid declared: “The threat of terror that lives among us, allegedly in Melbourne’s suburban streets, underlines the need to keep our troops in Afghanistan.

Terrorism is without borders.” The editorial denounced as “misguided” growing opposition to the Labor government’s increased commitment to the US-led occupation of Afghanistan.

The “liberal” Fairfax press was equally adamant. The August 6 editorial of the *Age* stated: “The alleged plot, involving men of Somali and Lebanese origin, to launch a suicide attack on an Australian Army base was foiled by the prompt concerted action of ASIO, the Australian Federal Police and the Victoria Police ... Australia’s intelligence and law-enforcement services showed themselves able to identify an apparent terrorist threat and respond to it appropriately.” The *Age* urged its readers to now realise that “nowhere on the planet is immune from the threat of terrorism”.

The unanimity of the media coverage is a warning of the lack of support within the political establishment for the defence of even the most basic legal and democratic rights, including the presumption of innocence. Only Somali community leaders, friends of the arrested men and a few lawyers spoke out against the witch-hunt.

Abdurrahman Oman, a leader of Melbourne’s 15,000-strong Somali community, asked journalists: “What do you call waking people up at four in the morning with guns? It is the police themselves that are the terrorists. They had 400 police and 19 raids, but they did not find anything. No guns, no ammunition, nothing. Now we have our kids being called terrorists at school.”

Maxxam, a 21-year-old Sunshine woman who knows the family of one of the arrested men, Nayef El Spayed, said: “As a Somali-born Australian I am outraged at these raids not only because my fellow Somalis are being targeted, but once again basic human rights are being violated.” Nayef El Sayed’s lawyer, Anthony Brand, said the publicity surrounding the case had the potential to corrupt any future trial. “I think if you did a straw poll, most people would think they [those arrested] are guilty,” he said.

Stephen Keim SC, the barrister who represented Indian-born Dr Mohamed Haneef, whose frameup on terrorist charges collapsed spectacularly under the Howard government in 2007, said the leaking of police intelligence smacked of the operation against Haneef. The federal police appeared to be “rushing” to claim early credit and win public support for the arrests. “I think there are also parallels in terms of the risk to a fair trial,” Keim commented.

Just as Howard did in Haneef’s case, Rudd called a media conference on the day of the police raids to ramp up fears of terrorism, claiming that it was “an enduring threat,” both at home and overseas. His motivation was the same: to try to stem hostility to the governments criminal collaboration with the US war on Afghanistan and Pakistan and to create yet

another pretext for further strengthening its police-state powers.

Just two weeks ago, the Labor government foreshadowed new measures to outlaw “incitement” of political violence. Within days of the latest arrests, a Rudd government adviser called for the military’s electronic eavesdropping agency, the Defence Signals Directorate (DSD), to be given the power to spy on Australians at home or abroad. According to the *Australian*, Professor Ross Babbage’s proposal is backed by “senior government officials in Canberra”.

This plan would give the military an unprecedented role in civilian affairs, with a powerful and sophisticated capacity to listen into domestic phone calls and telecommunications. The DSD is part of a worldwide web of military surveillance, partnered with the American National Security Agency (NSA) in the US and the General Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) in Britain.

Under the Intelligence Services Act, the DSD is barred from collecting internal intelligence on Australians unless authorised by the defence minister. It is known to have been used in 2001 when the Howard government turned away the Tampa, a Norwegian container ship carrying more than 400 refugees. The DSD reportedly bugged the ship’s captain Arne Rinnan, talking to his Australian lawyers, as part of the government’s efforts to block the refugees from exercising their legal right to apply for asylum. The DSD was also mobilised during the failed witch-hunt against Haneef. Last December’s Clarke report into the Haneef affair revealed that the DSD answered 71 requests to intercept the young doctor’s telecommunications.



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