

Australian government cancels 20 passports over Syrian conflict

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The Abbott government, formally acting on advice from the domestic spy agency, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), has recently cancelled the passports of 20 Sydney men, claiming they might engage in “politically motivated violence” if they travelled overseas. The cases only came to light over the weekend, when one of their lawyers informed the media.

The men, all Australian citizens, reportedly received letters suddenly informing them that they had received an “adverse security assessment” from ASIO. Without any warning, hearing or semblance of due process, they were ordered to surrender their passports, depriving them of their basic democratic right to travel or leave the country.

The move followed the arrests of two Sydney men last week. One was accused of recruiting young men to travel to Syria and fight alongside Islamist forces against the Assad regime, and the other was alleged to have prepared to travel and engage in the conflict. Both face up to 10 years in jail if convicted under the Foreign Incursions and Recruitment Act, which was extended as part of the barrage of “anti-terror” laws imposed since 2001.

The Australian Passports Act gives the foreign minister arbitrary powers to cancel passports on vague and highly-political grounds such as “the person would be likely to engage in conduct that might prejudice the security of Australia or a foreign country.”

None of the 20 men has been charged with a criminal offence, let alone convicted of one. The letters they received reportedly referred to their “jihadi mentality” as one of the grounds for their “adverse security clearances.” In other words, it appears that their right to travel has been revoked, not on the basis of specific evidence of a criminal act or preparations to commit

one, but on ideological and political grounds.

This represents a precedent that could be invoked to attack the rights of any individual whose politics are considered a threat by the powers that be. Just last week, the government revoked the passport of a former intelligence officer who was due to testify in The Hague about Australia’s bugging of East Timor’s government offices.

One of the citizens ordered to surrender his passport, Abu Bakr, a 19-year-old labourer, had reportedly posted videos commenting on the Syrian conflict online. He said he received “a 10-page letter saying I had a jihadi mentality.” He told Australia’s Special Broadcasting Service that he had no travel plans. “I haven’t done anything wrong,” he said. “I’m an Australian citizen ... My record is as good as gold.”

Zali Burrows, a lawyer representing 15 of the men, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation that none of her clients had any intention to fight in Syria. She commented: “Some of these guys were just young guys wanting to go on holiday to Bali, they even packed their board shorts. Others wanted to go and visit a sick relative.”

Bakr and 14 others have announced their intention to challenge the government’s decision. They confront a “Catch 22” situation, however, because the government and ASIO can invoke “national security” to refuse to disclose exactly why they were stripped of their passports.

Over the past decade, individuals whose passports were seized, including former Guantanamo Bay detainee Mamdouh Habib, faced protracted legal battles to regain their right to travel, made virtually impossible by the refusal of courts to order the government to provide the information that allegedly led to the passport cancellation.

These cases are part of a mounting attack on the core democratic rights associated with citizenship. According to ASIO's 2012-13 annual report, 18 people had passports withheld on security grounds, up from seven the previous year.

A discussion has taken place within the political establishment about the possibility of revoking citizenship altogether. In October, Immigration Minister Scott Morrison suggested that the Abbott government could block the return of Australian citizens alleged to have participated in the Syrian conflict. The former Labor government's foreign minister, Bob Carr, revealed that he had considered the measure, but had been advised that it would be illegal. (See "Australian government considers blocking return of Syrian fighters" <http://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2013/11/05/citi-n05.html>)

Attorney-General George Brandis seized on last week's arrests to try to rekindle the bogus "war on terror," declaring that the arrests were "a reminder of the risks to Australia's national security from individuals who support or engage in foreign conflicts." Brandis immediately identified himself with the arrests, expressing his "concern about the radicalisation of Australians as a result of the Syrian conflict."

These events underscore the fraud of the "war on terror" and the utter hypocrisy of successive Australian governments. Having backed the US war drive against Syria for two years, including Washington's support of the Islamist militias that constitute the main contingents of the so-called rebels, the political establishment and its intelligence apparatus is now invoking the activities of these forces to ramp up attacks on basic democratic rights.

This coincides with a shift in Washington's foreign policy, reflected in the Obama administration's step back from a direct strike on Syria in September, and its initiation of negotiations with the Iranian regime, Syria's closest ally in the region. Washington's turn is bound up with the "pivot to Asia," its aggressive military build up in the Asia-Pacific region directed against China, and fears that getting bogged down in a new Iraq-style war in Syria would hinder that project.

Moreover, the Abbott government is seeking to whip up new fears of "radicalisation" and terrorism in a bid to blunt public suspicion and hostility towards the

security and intelligence agencies following Edward Snowden's revelations of their extensive involvement in the US National Security Agency's global surveillance operations.



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