

New Zealand government cancels passports over Syrian conflict

Tom Peters
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Prime Minister John Key announced last Monday that his government had cancelled the passports of a “small group” of people—fewer than 10—who were allegedly planning to join “rebel groups” in Syria. He also claimed that some New Zealand citizens were already fighting in Syria and would be monitored by intelligence agencies if they returned.

The passports were revoked without any semblance of due process. This sets a dangerous new precedent. The individuals involved have not been charged with anything. The only justification offered by Key is that they *might* end up in a rebel force linked to Al Qaeda. He told the media that they could “pose a threat to other New Zealanders, *if* they become radicalised” [emphasis added].

An amendment to the Passports Act, introduced by the former Labour government in 2005, gives the internal affairs minister the right to unilaterally cancel someone’s passport if the minister “believes on reasonable grounds” that they intend to engage in a “terrorist act.”

Despite this sweeping and anti-democratic legislation, Otago University law professor Andrew Geddis and Wellington lawyer Graeme Edgeler both told Radio NZ that the government’s actions could still be unlawful. The government has not accused the individuals of intending to commit terrorist acts; Key merely stated that they wanted to go to Syria “to fight in a way we don’t think is a sensible step for them to take.”

The National Party government’s decision follows the Australian and British governments’ cancellation of dozens of passports for citizens allegedly involved in the Syrian conflict or planning to join the so-called rebels.

The Key government’s actions are completely hypocritical. Like his counterparts in London and

Canberra, Key has backed the US-led intervention for regime change in Syria for the past three years. Washington and its regional allies, including Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have armed and trained the reactionary Islamist militias that constitute the main force fighting President Bashar al-Assad’s government.

Now Key is invoking the activity of these Al Qaeda-linked forces to justify the government’s attacks on democratic rights. He told the media he had decided to publicly reveal the cancellation of passports in order to make “the point that our intelligence agencies do some very good work and they’re actually necessary. And last year, when we were having a debate around GCSB [Government Communications Security Bureau], one of the big points I was making was that GCSB provides assistance to SIS [Security Intelligence Service] in exactly these circumstances.”

Last year the government expanded the powers of the GCSB—the country’s external intelligence agency—to allow it to spy on New Zealand citizens and residents. The legislative change, which was opposed by 89 percent of the population, followed revelations that the GCSB had illegally spied on more than 80 people since 2003, including NZ resident Kim Dotcom, an Internet entrepreneur.

Whistleblower Edward Snowden also revealed that the GCSB’s spy bases were part of the US National Security Agency’s worldwide spying operations. Key has stated that he expects Snowden to release more information soon about New Zealand’s role in the NSA’s massive global spying operations. On Thursday, after US President Barack Obama stated that “there is no country where we have a ‘no-spy’ agreement,” Key admitted that US agencies spied on New Zealanders “from time to time” but only if there was a “very good reason.”

In fact, as Snowden revealed, the NSA gathers and stores data from phone calls, text messages, emails and Internet searches of hundreds of millions of people worldwide.

The opposition Labour party criticised the cancellation of passports, but its position is no less hypocritical. The previous Labour government, supported by the Greens, allowed the GCSB to spy on New Zealanders and strengthened military and intelligence ties with Washington by taking part in the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Labour's criticisms are bound up with concerns in sections of the ruling elite that Key's statements could undermine attempts to portray the Syrian bloodbath as a struggle for democracy. Like the National government, Labour and the Greens have repeatedly made clear their support for US intervention in Syria. This week, Obama renewed his threats against Syria, declaring that he reserved "the right to exercise military action on behalf of America's national security interests."

Labour's assistant foreign affairs spokesman Phil Goff told Radio Live that while there were some extremist rebel groups, "some of them are liberal democrats." He said he had no objection to the GCSB "monitoring" individuals returning from Syria, but told the *New Zealand Herald* that they should be allowed "to fight for the cause of democracy against tyrannical despots." He likened the US-backed militias to the socialist-inspired workers fighting against Franco's fascist army during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s.

The comparison is obscene. The "rebels" are dominated by fundamentalist Sunni groups, including the Al-Qaeda-linked Al Nusra Front and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). These jihadists, along with more "moderate" groups, have carried out numerous atrocities, including massacring minority Alawite Shiites and Christians. They have no significant support in the Syrian working class.

Sections of the corporate media have echoed Labour's criticisms. The *Herald's* editorial on Wednesday, while declaring its support for the GCSB's spying, stated: "[T]here is no doubt [Western governments] would welcome the overthrow of Assad. Why, then, should they care that a few of their citizens have gone [to fight him]?"

Neither Labour nor the *Herald* has any concern for

defending democratic rights. Their statements are intended to once more re-affirm the commitment of New Zealand's ruling class to Washington's drive toward direct military intervention.



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